

Oracle 641

Chapter 641 - Bloodline Grades

Jake was tempted to give a spontaneous answer, but when he seriously addressed the matter, he realized that it was far more complex than the little alien's casual tone suggested.

Of course, it wasn't as if he had never wondered about it. When he got his own bloodline, his first instinct had been to compare himself to others. Xi had been remarkably forthright at the time, allowing him to position himself properly in the bloodline hierarchy.

However, Jake was only an Oracle Sergeant at the time, and the information he had access to was still rather limited. Even with Xi's patient explanations, he had repeatedly found the gradation of certain bloodlines inconsistent.

Tim's impure Beskyrian bloodline was a perfect example. It was graded Grade 8, even though it had no direct evolutionary potential. Without the Luck Aether Encoding of his Oracle Device and his Ordeal Rewards, the boy would have been left with no means of increasing his strength other than to level up his bloodline itself.

It didn't matter much at the time, but Jake now knew that his Myrtharian Bloodline had a level cap. Once he hit level 4, his bloodline would stop evolving no matter how much he dedicated himself or how many lava baths he took each day.

In other words, without outside help Tim could at best get a little luckier before his luck also reached its ceiling. This was a far cry from the unlimited potential in a category expected of a Grade 7 or above Bloodline.

"I thought I knew, but I guess I don't." Jake finally answered after much hesitation.

Tim just shrugged. He had never given it a thought. He just knew that Grade 8 was quite good, but that it wasn't enough for him. Hence his presence here today.

"In that case, let me share with you my understanding of this classification and the one my own master taught me." Cekt adopted a lecturing pitch after sitting cross-legged while levitating a meter above the ground.

The alien cleared his throat, then declaimed,

"First, there is the official classification, then the unofficial. Both remain valid under any circumstances. Normal Evolvers will never need to know the latter, but it is at the heart of all considerations for Aetherists and high-rank Evolvers. To avoid losing you, I will first teach you the official Bloodline classification.

"As you probably know, Bloodlines range from Grade 0 to 10. First of all, please know that this is not the limit, but this topic is irrelevant to today's discussion. Are you ready for the lesson? Then I'll begin.

"Grade 0... Ah, this one must be familiar to you." Cekt suddenly snickered snidely as he leered at them with pity. "Any Grade 0 Bloodline example come to mind?"

Jake snorted, but Tim raised his hand swiftly like he did in school as an eager school kid to show that he knew the answer and blurted out,

"Earthlings."

The little alien clapped happily before continuing,

"That's right. Everything from your planet Earth is Grade 0. That basically means that your Aether Code doesn't give you any special advantages or disadvantages. It's blank. It may sound lame, but it's not as bad as you might think. I'll come back to that later.

"Next comes Grade 1, which includes all species with a simple supernatural ability, but with little or no evolutionary potential. The ability in question will usually give a greater or lesser advantage among ordinary people, but not enough to flip the chessboard. Common examples of Grade 1 Bloodlines are often named after the ability they confer, such as Telepath, Enhanced Strength, Ageless, etc.

Inferior mutants are also a good example of this Grade. Being able to throw a fireball a few dozen meters, or an enhanced strength may seem incredible, but a firearm does the job just as well in most cases. Still, a mutant with superhuman strength can easily become rich by pursuing a career in sports, while a telepath can easily rise socially if he uses his gift well. In an ordinary world, these talents are more than enough to shine. It's not beyond the realm of possibility that there have been some on Earth throughout history."

Jake tried to replay in his mind what he knew of some of the athletes and geniuses from his planet who had made history and concluded that there was insufficient evidence, but that Cekt's premise was still plausible.

"Grade 2." Cekt calmly resumed. "Includes any Bloodline with one or more simple supernatural abilities or a complex supernatural ability with zero or low potential for evolution. This is usually enough to become exceptional and unmatched in an ordinary world, but not enough to trample all over the laws. To use one of your Earth comic book heroes, Spiderman falls into that category."

Jake was more surprised by the fact that the alien knew of Spiderman's existence rather than his explanation. As for Tim's eyes... they were sparkling. Probably because his Bloodline was better than Spiderman's.

"Grade 3. Any Bloodline that may have a direct or indirect potential for limited evolution in any of the four Aspects. Remember this term. The four Aspects are your Aether status, Body Status, Soul Status and Bloodline. In this category we can mention as known examples the Vampires and Werewolf born ordinary. Often made this way by a bite, scratch or some other ceremony, they are usually unable to surpass their creator and cannot disobey him.

"From this rank, at least, it is possible to evolve. It may take an extraordinary opportunity or a stroke of fate, but it's not an out-of-reach dream. For example, a Werewolf could conspire against his Alpha and take his place, or the Alpha could die for another reason, allowing him to become free again. Under these conditions, the bloodline gets the chance to be promoted to Grade 4 or higher.

"Grade 4." Cekt continued to recite. Once started, he was a real chatterbox. "Any Bloodline with no direct potential for unlimited evolution in any of the four Aspects, but possessing a conditional indirect

means of evolution in a specific area that can eventually rival and even improve one or more of the four Aspects. This example is easier to understand. The two Egean sisters who hang out with you have a Grade 4 Bloodline.

In their home world where Fire Elemental Particles abound, they can theoretically become very powerful mages. Their bodies and minds will be strengthened indirectly by their cultivation. However, once on B842, deprived of their energy source, they quickly found themselves powerless. Another example are the ordinary Fluid Wielders in your Third Ordeal."

"Grade 5. Any Bloodline with no direct potential for unlimited evolution in any of the four Aspects, but possessing a means of indirect evolution in a specific area that can ultimately improve one or more of the four Aspects. The requirement is less strict than at Grade 4. This includes the Water Elf bloodline of your cousin Vincent, the improved Egean Bloodline of the two sisters who can now convert ambient Aether into their element, and the Nosks, whose dentrites can evolve to store more and more energy, which then strengthens all their attributes."

As he finished his sentence, Cekt paused to moisten his lips. Seeing that he still had their attention, he warned them sternly,

"Up to Grade 5, the most important thing to remember is that these Bloodlines have 'limited' potential. There is hope, but their evolution is not guaranteed. In the vast majority of cases, there is an ultimate cap of power that these species will never exceed. Exceptions to this rule are not enough to increase a bloodline's Grade."

Jake nodded thoughtfully. The Super Archmages from Ega were not omnipotent mages or their world would never have been forcibly transported to B842. It was obvious that the cultivation of elemental particles had a limit.

Seeing that it was crystal clear to both of them, Cekt nodded in turn before continuing his introduction.

"From now on, all the Grades I'm going to describe have a concrete way to become infinitely powerful in one or more Aspects.

"Grade 6. Any Bloodline with no direct potential for unlimited evolution in any of the four Aspects, but possessing an indirect means of unlimited evolution in at least one of them. If this condition is easily met, the bloodline will be considered Grade 7.

"In the examples you know, Jake, there is Svara's Valkyrie Bloodline which allows her to harvest souls and spiritual energy all around to strengthen her Shadows and her own Soul. Your cousin Kevin who became an Alpha Werebear is another example. His stats won't grow on their own, but he can become monstrously powerful by growing and maintaining control over his pack.

"Next is Grade 7, I guess I don't need to say anything more. This category includes Bloodlines with unlimited, but conditional, potential in one of the four Aspects. For Myrmidians, this is Aether. The condition is to constantly surpass oneself and seek more and more victories. For the Eltarians, it is their Soul. Whether it is by stealing the spiritual energy of their victims or by diligently training their minds, they can make their soul stronger. Kintharians can evolve their bodies by drawing on heat, earth, and radiation, resources common to virtually every world.

"At Grade 8, it's the same thing but with two Aspects. At Grade 9, the same but with 3 Aspects. This is the case with your Silver Myrtharian Bloodline since it has advanced to level 3. As for Grade 10, it is unlimited potential in the four Aspects.

"This is the case with Wyatt and his Vampire Progenitor Bloodline."

Chapter 642 - The Unofficial Classification

"Are Vampire Progenitors that powerful?" Jake frowned.

There was no doubt about Wyatt's strength, but in the end there was little the vampire could do against his radioactive magic. A small burst of ultraviolet and he'd run off like a dog with his tail between his legs.

Cekt picked at his ear with a fussy air, then nodded,

"They are. Most vampire species have two evolutionary pathways: aging and consuming blood. In ordinary Vampires, even if the one who transformed them is dead, and even if they are very old, they can only consume blood from their own former species. This is the price to pay for a curse with benefits. Ordinary blood will only give them a weak boost and will only satisfy their hunger. If they try to consume a better or slightly different blood, their lives may be in danger.

"It will often take considerable Constitution and Vitality to digest blood just a tad different from what their stomach and curse can tolerate. It's the snake that bites its own tail. Without huge stats, they can't digest more potent blood, but when they can, it's already practically useless... Besides, the strength gain they get from aging follows a logarithmic curve. Young vampires gain strength rapidly in the first few years after their conversion, then this growth slows down gradually until it reaches a certain limit. This is why the bloodline of ordinary Vampires, even when freed from their creator, cannot exceed Grade 5.

"The descendants of Vampire Progenitors are different. Being born this way, they have no evolutionary limit to speak of and their starting point is much higher. Their strength gain also slows down over the years, but their ability to digest the blood of other species is much more developed. The Griffiths clan that Wyatt is from takes this talent even further and can refine different blood to evolve their Bloodline further. It won't be easy, but if he can do it, his Bloodline could one day reach Grade 11 or 12. This example is not common, but not unheard of in the Mirror Universe's older systems either. Digestors aren't the only ones who can mutate by assimilating other Bloodlines."

Jake said nothing, but he was pulling a long face.

'Good thing he didn't drink my blood.'

It was hard enough to fight a young Vampire Progenitor as it was. If this one also became immune to the sun, or even replenished itself with its rays... Well, it was better not to dwell on it.

"I understand the official classification." Jake relented but remained steadfast in his resolve. "However, was it really worth teasing us with these Grade 11 and 12 if you're not going to elaborate on them? Besides keeping us in the dark, I don't see the point. What are we going to do if we really run into an enemy with such a bloodline?"

"Err, that's a good point." Cekt rubbed his nose with a falsely embarrassed look. "Fine, it's not a big secret either anyway. From Grade 0 to 2, there is no potential for evolution, from Grade 3 to 5 the potential for evolution is limited except in exceptional cases, while from Grade 6 onwards it becomes possible to evolve in an unlimited way by one means or another. Grade 10 has unlimited potential to evolve in all four Aspects, but it too must meet certain conditions.

"For Wyatt, it's aging and drinking blood. These conditions are simple to meet, but there is nothing else he can do. Training, weight training, fighting, meditating will do him no good except to hone his skills and sharpen his mind. In other words, although his potential is unlimited, he cannot become omnipotent in a snap of his fingers.

"That's the limit of Grade 10."

"So if I understand correctly..." Jake deduced composedly as he paced back and forth. "From Grade 11 on there are no more requirements to evolve. Does everything we do make us stronger? Or will we become monstrously powerful no matter what?"

The last assumptions were not rhetorical. He waited for his master's answer.

"Well, you can look at it that way." Cekt cackled impishly. "But as you can imagine, no one is truly invincible in the Mirror Universe or anywhere else for that matter. That's the extent of the official classification.

"Let's say there's a species out there in the depths of the cosmos with no evolutionary potential, but immediately born with near omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. Should I label its bloodline as Grade 1 or 2?"

Jake and Tim answered in unison,

"Of course not."

"And you're absolutely right!" Cekt clenched his little fists with a fanatical spark in his eyes. "Let me show you something."

The Wendok ended his levitation and motioned for them to follow him into another room in the back of his lab that Jake had never visited. It was a spacious, dusty storage room filled with wall shelves. What was interesting was what was neatly stored on them.

Crystalline spheres the size of bowling balls. At least the ones near the entrance. The dimly lit room stretched like a long, endless corridor and the spheres got smaller and smaller with distance, but not just because of the perspective. Beyond a few hundred meters, these spheres were no bigger than a marble.

Inside these spherical crystals, Aether Symbols composed of countless Aether Runes floated within. Indeed, each of these spheres contained an Aether Spell or Skill ready to be learned on the spot. All one had to do was touch them and accept the Runes' transfer.

Reveling in the dumbfounded and mouth agape reaction of his disciple, Cekt laughed out loud with pride and explained,

"I see you already know what it is. I guess you must have gotten some of them in the Dungeon, right? It may have been a fluke, but you were right not to use them. I'll show you why and you'll understand better right away."

Jake and Tim then silently followed the little alien as he hopped from one shelf to another to retrieve different sized crystal balls. They noticed, nonetheless, that the Aether Symbols inside were always the same, with a few rare exceptions. It was the same Aether Skill every time.

After walking for several kilometers, Cekt was done with his errand and they returned to the main lab loaded with several hundred crystal balls.

Jake and Tim were still in shock. With a fortune like that, Cekt could probably buy an entire planet, and he had hinted in a mumble that he had hundreds of warehouses like this elsewhere.

The Aetherist then positioned these crystals on the floor in a precise order, then happily admired his work before beckoning them to approach the largest sphere on the far left.

"Take a good look."

Cekt dipped his consciousness into that first sphere and the Aether Symbol inside activated at once. Under the Aetherist's masterful Aether Control, the Symbol was drawn out of its receptacle and floated up into the air before them. The alien then emitted a brief psychic pulse at it and the spell inside was initiated.

A white lightning bolt cracked the air bringing forth a peal of thunder, but the Wendok confined the electricity looking for an outlet until the spell expired.

Without a word, he redirected the Aether Symbol into his crystal, then repeated the demonstration with the next, slightly smaller sphere. Each time, a blinding bolt of white light shot out before being neutralized by the Aetherist.

After a few dozen demonstrations, Jake and Tim were no longer in the mood to admire the show. They understood what Cekt was getting at.

"All of these lightning bolts have the same power. But the Aether Symbol's size is not the same." Tim commented clear-headedly.

"Exactly." Cekt ruffled the boy's hair before sighing. "In absolute terms, the power of these spells is the same. Yet the price of the smallest sphere is nearly 1000 times greater than the largest. Why do you think there is such a difference?"

"Does the body have a maximum amount of Aether Symbols it can handle?" Jake had already been pondering this in the Dungeon and that was why he hadn't rushed to assimilate these Aether Skills.

"It makes sense, but not quite." Cekt refuted cheerily. "Just watch the next part, you'll get a better understanding."

The alien returned to the first sphere and pulled out the Aether Symbol like the previous time, but without activating it. He then did the same with one of the only spheres with a different Aether Spell inside. Then he superimposed the two Aether Symbols and...

Nothing happened.

The Aether only reacted to very high concentrations of Aether and/or mental fluctuations. These Aether Runes intertwined without conflict.

Then Cekt activated both spells simultaneously. The Aether circuits ignited and the Aether that was supposed to go one way took another because of the overlapping of the two Aether Symbols. A white flash of lightning took shape along with a strange reddish aura and both Aether Symbols collapsed at the same time. The Aether stored in their Runes dispersed at once, merging into the atmosphere.

"Do you get it now?" Cekt asked grinlessly.

"I get it." Jake replied slowly.

The alien nodded in approval, then pointed to the largest sphere and the smallest one, which was about ten times smaller.

"That's the unofficial classification we Aetherists use. The first and last spheres are the difference between a Grade 1 and 2 Bloodline, but on a microscopic scale, since unlike an Aether Spell that is placed directly into one's body, the Bloodline is imprinted in every cell."

With a very grave demeanor, the little alien caught his breath and concluded his lesson with a final statement.

"The higher the Grade, the smaller the Runes making up the Bloodline's Aether Code and the more you can fit.. It is the miniaturization of its Aether Code that determines a Bloodline's Grade."

Chapter 643 - The Wilderth

Jake tried to work out all the logical consequences arising from these principles. There were many, and he could already see some pessimistic prospects.

However, what really mattered to him at that moment was whether or not he could merge his bloodline with Tim's. It was for this reason in the first place that Cekt had imposed this lecture on them.

"You said that Tim, whose Bloodline is impure should get most of the benefits of my Myrtharian Bloodline, but that in my case it would be more complicated." Jake suddenly repeated, echoing his master's words. "I take it this somehow reflects the premises underlying the unofficial classification you just introduced to us?"

"Precisely." The alien nodded in agreement. "Although the Myrtharian Bloodline is considered Grade 9 by the Oracle System and the incomplete one of Tim's is Grade 8, the Aether Runes forming their Aether Code are similar in size. Your Myrtharian Bloodline's Aether Code already occupies most of the available space in your cells. To merge two Bloodlines, their Aether Code must become one. The Aether Runes must be the same size and in layman's language form a readable and coherent text.

"If you were to assimilate a Bloodline with a higher Rank and a more miniaturized Aether Code, it would be different. It would still be impossible to merge the two Bloodlines, but the smaller Aether Runes of the second Bloodline would be able to fit between those of the first without interfering with their respective Aether circuits. In this case, you would actually have two different Bloodlines in your body,

not a hybrid Bloodline that is a mixture of the two. Unfortunately, this is not the case here. I had to make a choice for you."

"And what is that choice?" Jake inquired, still curious about the compromise his master had reached.

"Your Myrtharian Bloodline will remain dominant, but the Lucky Body and Luck Aether attributes of the Beskyrians will be added to the mix, evolving under the same rules as your Myrtharian Body and other Aether stats." Cekt summarized truthfully. "You won't have any of the innate Bloodline Skills that Beskyrians have. Tim, on the other hand, will get most of your Bloodline Skills, but he will also have to make choices."

Jake was pleasantly surprised. After all the Aetherist's warning speech, he had expected a much shakier outcome. Now all he had to do was practice as usual and his luck would eventually improve. Even if he couldn't actively control it, he could treat it as a passive skill.

"This is perfect. I am satisfied with this result. Thank you, master." Jake expressed his sincere thanks to him. The little alien had a vile temper, but he deserved his respect.

"Hmmp, it's only when there's a profit involved that you behave decently." Cekt complained, but by the smug smile on his face he was quite evidently pleased.

For a renowned Aetherist, having his efforts recognized was the best reward.

"I have two more questions." Jake thought about a minor detail, but one that bothered him. "First question. We agree that the Oracle System uses the official classification to judge a Bloodline's Grade, right?"

"That's right... What are you getting at?"

"In that case, why is Tim's incomplete Bloodline Grade 8? Luck isn't part of any of the Four Aspects, unless I'm wrong. Especially since Tim has no way to develop his Luck on his own other than with his Oracle Device."

Cekt gave him a peculiar look, as if he were looking at him as he really was for the first time. Eventually, he explained cryptically,

"Because luck is one of the exceptions. Being lucky gives you immense potential. Even with his current luck and his impure Bloodline, if Tim returned to Earth and dedicated himself to becoming stronger, he would eventually find a way to overcome his human condition. If the Oracle Device were to be given a Bloodline Grade, it would at least exceed Grade 7."

Jake thought briefly about this answer, then felt that the reasoning held up. Luck alone might not have been enough, but it also had to include Tim's Innate Luck Skill that allowed him to manually control his luck to achieve his goals.

"Second question. You don't have to answer." A knowledge-hungry expression surreptitiously flashed across Jake's face, "What's the best Bloodline you've ever heard of?"

Upon hearing this question, even the dozing Tim sat up sharply, his pupils sparkling with curiosity. It was the ultimate mystery that plagued every Evolver. Was it the Oracle's Bloodline? By the way, did the

Oracle have a Bloodline, or was it just an artificial intelligence governing the Mirror Universe in an all-powerful supercomputer?

In contrast to the flat refusal or the vague answer Jake expected, a melancholic, longing gleam drifted across the old alien's crumpled face. Instead of curtly rebuffing them by arguing that they were too wet behind the ears to worry about such distant things, he transmitted a holographic image contained in his bracelet.

A black hole and its perfectly modeled accretion disk popped up in Jake and Tim's minds. Both found it difficult to hide their perplexity.

"The ultimate creature of the Mirror Universe is a black hole?" Jake asked hesitantly.

Bam!

"Of course not, dumbass!" Cekt barked after whacking his cane on the top of his skull. "Look closely."

The camera zoomed in on a certain spot of the black hole when all of a sudden, the latter ejected a monumental jet of plasma and gamma rays into the cosmos. Instead of continuing to film the black hole, the camera chose to track the flying matter. The camera followed this substance until it cooled down enough to accrete and form a kind of asteroid.

As time accelerated, the camera followed the asteroid for billions of years until it eventually crashed into a certain volcanic planet teeming with lizards and reptiles that bore some resemblance to the western dragons of legend, only much more terrifying.

In the center of the crater formed by the asteroid, a shapeless mass of black, syrupy liquid reformed after the impact, quickly taking on the appearance of one of the local lizards. The creature had no shadow, no aura, no presence, no sensory organs, but from birth it was destined to become a super predator destined to rise to the apex of the food chain.

The lizard turned its eyeless face towards the camera and the recording was brought to an end.

Enjoying their stunned silence, Cekt said gravely,

"This is the species with the highest Bloodline Grade ever recorded. Grade 17. This video clip was personally filmed by the Ancient Designer, Zeldon."

"Other than the special circumstances of its birth, this thing didn't look all that impressive..." Tim muttered warily. Inwardly he thought, 'All this to become a damn lizard!'

Jake was more thoughtful and dwelt on other details. This life form was incubated or needed a black hole to come into existence. As soon as it landed on this lizard-covered planet, it had taken on the traits of a similar species. A baby admittedly, but his intuition told him that this chosen form was the most optimal.

An alien capable of withstanding the extreme conditions of a black hole could definitely not be judged on the basis of its appearance. Any local dragons and giant dinosaurs that would mess with it were doomed to a grim end.

"Do you have any idea where this was filmed?" Cekt flatly asked the child at his somewhat unimpressed reaction.

"I don't." Tim admitted laconically.

"System A0. The same world where you made your second Ordeal. The Aetherist revealed coldly. "That world was completely wiped out by the Digestors. Except for the Ancient Designer, Xion and his Zhorion people who guard an outpost, the rest of this universe belongs to the Digestors. This video clip is from a few million years before the System fell. As far as we know, this planet has been around all that time, and it's reportedly flourishing as never before. Even the Digestors can't do anything about this thing."

A creature capable of defeating an army of Digestors against which the entire Mirror Universe was powerless... Jake suddenly felt extremely insignificant and weak. The rapid progress that had gradually restored his self-confidence no longer seemed so remarkable.

In a rare burst of kindness, Cekt patted his shoulder with his little clawed hands.

"No need to be depressed. If anything, this should encourage you. For an Aetherist there is no more ambitious dream than to create an artificial bloodline that surpasses the best bloodline nature has to offer. If you succeed, I will be the happiest of masters.

"Besides, your family and this thing had something unique in common." Cekt burst out laughing before adding ironically after a small pause. "Your name."

"My name?"

"Indeed." The alien grinned enigmatically. "This Grade 17 Bloodline was named by Zeldon, who discovered it, a Wilderth. Don't look for any crazy explanation, it's a purely phonetic name. You and your family have nothing to do with this thing, or you would have taken over the Earth long ago. Still, this coincidence is quite striking, isn't it? Rather than discourage you, I'd rather you see this as a sign of your immense potential and a philosophy of life. Like that creature, keep adapting wherever you go and luck will keep smiling on you. Your birth may not be as special, but you can rise to the top of the food chain wherever your steps take you.

"Maybe one day you and this Wilderth will meet face to face and then you'll know which Bloodline has surpassed the other."

Chapter 644 - One Year

Several hours after returning to his island, Jake was still shaken. There was a supreme creature in this vast Mirror Universe with his last name! Such a coincidence? It was just insane to even think about it.

In the end, the bloodline transfer proceeded without a hitch, but only after a plot twist with not-so-small consequences.

Jake had taken the opportunity to mention the survivors from Lucia and Gerulf's world that his faction had recruited, and as expected the alien showed great interest in their unique bloodlines.

It was not out of loyalty to his master that he had sacrificed his subordinates to the old Aetherist, but because Tim's future was at stake. The child had chosen to assimilate his Myrtharian Bloodline to supplement his overly impure Beskyrian Bloodline.

Tim had tried to obtain purer blood samples, but soon after his First Ordeal, the price in the Oracle Store skyrocketed, as if it was out of stock. Subsequent Ordeal rewards had not been to his satisfaction either.

It was only for this reason that the child had reluctantly set his sights on Jake's bloodline. With Ulfar and the other Beskyrians, it was an unsolvable problem that now had a simple and straightforward solution.

The only catch was that they had to be convinced to donate their Blood Essence. After several Ordeals, they were all able to control the quality of the blood drawn, and this required their consent.

Following this logic, baiting Cekt by stirring up his fanatical interest in new bloodlines was the ideal plan. The Aetherist had many faults, but if he had one redeemable quality, it was that he was loaded. If he was bent on it, buying their Blood Essence for an adequate amount of Black Aether Crystals to compensate for the weakening of their Bloodlines was entirely conceivable.

Except that in the end, Tim had still opted for the original plan, which was to assimilate Jake's Myrtharian Bloodline. Of his own volition, he had forsaken the path of ultimate luck and taken a more winding path instead.

From this alone, one could imagine the admiration he held for Jake and his powers. Tim's explanation on the way back when Jake brought up the matter was pretty plain, but the firm conviction behind it was undeniable nonetheless.

"I want to be stronger to protect Lily and the others. I don't want to see what happened to my mom happen again." The prepubescent teenager had righteously justified himself as he clenched his fists, "If I just rely on my luck and it's no longer enough I'll be powerless. I'd rather be strong and have my fate in my own hands than pray for a favorable outcome that I don't fully control."

It was a respectable choice. Given the choice between a pure Beskyrian bloodline or his Myrtharian Bloodline, Jake would still have made the same decisions. Given the alternative of being strong or having strong subordinates granting our wishes at their whim, the first option would always trump the second.

Once back on his island, Jake informed Will of the results of his meeting with Cekt, who then took it upon himself to inform the leaders of each community of the upcoming visit of the Aetherist and his blood collection objective. Ulfar, Asfrid and the other leaders were not very enthusiastic about this news, but when they were assured they would be compensated, they agreed.

Who knows? Maybe they too would need the Aetherist's expertise one of these days. When in doubt, it was best to lay the groundwork for a solid trusting relationship now while they still could.

Jake was done with Cekt, and immediately went back into seclusion to continue his training. Ironically, because of the rapid rise in Aether density, there was no need to increase the room temperature to further optimize his training.

The lava temperature may have been the same, but each day the heat perceived by his body grew markedly higher, even with his meteoric progress.

His mind clear and refreshed, he let himself sink back into his lava pool and immersed his consciousness seamlessly into the Purgatory. His endless quest for Soul Glyphs resumed and he completely forgot about the bloodline transfer he had just undergone.

His appearance had not changed, nor had the name of his Bloodline, but in his Body Status, there was now an additional stat at the bottom.

[Luck: 10 points]

As with the other Body Stats, under the effect of the lvl 3 Myrtharian Body passive each point was worth eight. With these 10 points, regardless of his Luck Aether, his luck would now be at least eight times that of a normal human.

His Aether and Body Luck would grow along with the rest of his stats according to the evolutionary principles of his Myrtharian Bloodline, making him progressively luckier. The consequences this would have in the distant future were impossible to predict, but the short-term ones became apparent as soon as he resumed his training.

When he began a training module in the Purgatory Dream, there were always tasks he did not perform correctly or words he should not have said to the artifact-modeled instructor. Whether it was a master blacksmith, a farmer, a rancher, an architect, a mechanic, or a doctor, they all had their own character and requirements, and only they could grant the precious Soul Glyphs he coveted.

In order to obtain them, Jake had to satisfy each of their wishes, even those that were not clearly expressed. Often this meant reaching a certain standard in the profession or field being taught, but there were often other, more subtle conditions to fulfill.

In the case of his Blacksmith Soul Glyph, for example, he had been required to successfully forge an Inferior Aether Artifact out of ordinary scrap metal. Every step counted, from refining the materials, tempering them, to the final quenching of the weapon.

Aside from the excellent Aether Control and mastery of an obscure technique involved, the success rate for a beginner was ridiculously low, even with Jake's intelligence, perception and dexterity.

With luck, as long as that success rate wasn't zero, he could drastically increase that probability. With luck guiding his actions, he could achieve his goals faster and earn more Soul Glyphs in the same amount of time.

As the months and weeks went by, all his stats continued to improve, and his Body Luck also began to grow, albeit at a snail's pace compared to the other stats. Nevertheless, even this small progress eventually led to big changes.

Three months into his second seclusion, Jake had collected 21 different Soul Glyphs, ranging from Bronze to Silver. Four months later, that number jumped to 33. Five months later, 45.

At the same time, the Purgatory never stopped producing Aether. A billion points were added to its savings every day, making it richer and richer without him even caring about it.

Will did not squander the trust placed in him either and continued to expand the business and financial capabilities of his subfaction. The daily activation of United We Stand was soon extended to 12 hours a day instead of 8, then 14.

This virtuous circle further boosted the efficiency of his training and that of all other members. In the sixth month, the businessman went into seclusion as well, but his baby dragon Charizard, who everyone thought was dead, made a comeback.

Jake had long ago learned that the dragon's soul was housed in a crystal, like all the genetically modified creatures in his Second Ordeal. So he wasn't surprised when it returned, but for the others it was as disturbing as seeing their dead grandmother knocking on their door.

While everyone was practicing, their Floating Islands coalition became unnaturally quiet. The lively activity faded completely, but the Aether signatures of their inhabitants became more and more radiant.

At the same time, the Aether density also kept rising above 290, as if the Mirror Universe itself was bent on nullifying any progress they had made. With the Aether density growing faster and faster, all of the Myrtharian Nerds began to train desperately, all wondering when their leader Jake would give them the green light for the next Ordeal.

Yet, despite their impatience, none of them gave in to the temptation. Even Peter Brady, the unreliable drug addict from their Third Ordeal, who rarely showed up, chose to wait. The only one who never showed up during this long period was Sigmar, but his Aether donations to the faction never stopped rolling in.

Finally, nine months into Jake's second seclusion, or a year after his long training began, he opened his eyes.

As if on cue, all the other Myrtharian Nerds came out of their seclusion as well. With nothing to hide, their Oracle Device had predicted the day his training would end.

The two sisters, Will, the felines, his cousins, Ulfar, Asfrid and all the other members had been ready for a long time. They were just waiting for him to brave the danger again.

They patiently put on their armor with slow, measured movements, and then as one they all made their way to Jake's island. When he left his training area, he was taken aback by the sight of them all waiting in good order in front of his lvl 2 Red Cube.

Understanding their intentions, Jake asked Xi for the time, then realizing they still had a few minutes to spare, he paid the Aether required to upgrade the Red Cube to the next level after taking a stunned look at his new fortune. He also expanded his island to accommodate the size of the building.

The ten-meter red cube magically swelled to a huge block ten times larger. Understanding his intention, the other members calmly positioned themselves around the Red Cube, waiting for the official start signal of their Fourth Ordeal.

As on previous occasions, the Red Cube began to flicker and they strode resolutely inside. A darkness smothering their very sense of existence engulfed them and they were instantly cut off from the rest of the world.

Their Fourth Ordeal had officially begun.

Chapter 645 - Quanoth And Aurae

When Jake returned to that claustrophobic dark place, he experienced a tingling rush of excitement. After a year of learning and practicing all sorts of different professions, his fierceness had lost its edge and it was time to sharpen it again.

As with past Ordeals, the mental notification briefing him for his next Ordeal did not appear right away. The next few hours constituted the first real break he had taken in several months. He took the opportunity to inspect his Oracle Status.

[AETHER STATUS:]

[Aether Strength, Agility, Constitution, Vitality, Intelligence, Perception, Extrasensory Perception, Luck: 3127.3 points]

[Charisma: 1000 points]

[Aether Core: 5000 points] (406>5000 pts)

[BODY STATUS:]

[Physique: Silver Myrtharian Body lvl3]

[Height: 4.21 meters] (3.31>4.21m)]

[Weight: 3564kg (1241>3564kg)]

[Strength: 1200 points (263>1200)]

[Agility: 631 points (136>631)]

[Constitution: 1250.3 points (301.2>1250.3)]

[Vitality: 968.2 points (276.4>968.2)]

[Intelligence: 340.9 points (188.7>340.9)]

[Perception: 713.7 points] (181>713.7)]

[Luck: 43 (10>43)]

[Aether Soul Core : Lvl 6(5>6): Can contain up to 10M(5>10) Aether points. Amplifies mental attacks, Intelligence, and Extrasensory Perception by 60%(50>60) when the Soul and Spirit Body are merged with it. In addition to protecting the Soul, it can be considered a proto Soul Artifact. As it evolves and becomes imbued with the thoughts of its host, it will develop its own abilities.]

[SOUL STATUS: Myrtharian Soul lvl 3(Intermediate Heat, Earth, Radiation and Metal attributes), 71 Soul Glyphs: A Fish in Water, Apex Predator, Extreme Diver, Harbinger of Chaos, Blacksmith, Farmer, Swordsman, Alchemist, Monster, Hunter, Warden ect...]

[Spirit Body lvl 28(24>28) (Ghost): Its density is such that the Spirit Body begins to have tangible effects on the physical world and can temporarily separate itself from its carnal envelope. Out-of-body journeys are now possible, but keeping in mind that in this form the soul is extremely vulnerable and the physical body abandoned in a state of clinical death. The soul is now partially resistant to heat and radiation and can extract a portion of the energy it contains.]

[True Will: 25 points.(3>25)]

His still mind churned several times as he read. He had mentally prepared himself for such changes, but when he actually faced them he was still astounded.

First of all, his Aether stats had almost evened out, except for his Charisma Aether which was not part of his Bloodline. This was the first time such a phenomenon had occurred.

[Your Silver Myrtharian Bloodline certainly played a role, but I think the way you've been training this past year is the main cause.] Xi gave her opinion gently, before reminding him, [Don't forget, you haven't killed anyone in the past year.]

"Right..."

Besides the difference in Encoding cost of each stat, the most important reason why his Aether stats had different values was because by killing, defeating his enemies he would get a portion of their Aether and Soul Energy. Since their Aether stats were most often unbalanced, this reflected on his own Aether Status.

"But this height... And this weight..." Jake was about to burst into tears. "How am I going to get through the doors?"

Cekt's tasteless joke eight months earlier wanting to humiliate them by crawling under a miniature door now had a nasty ring to it. Even if he wanted to, Jake couldn't crawl under that door anymore.

He began to regret not buying the Miniaturization Aether Spell at the Oracle Store. He had more than enough money to afford it...

[While you were training, I took the liberty of connecting to the Blue Cube on your island to buy it on your behalf. Not knowing which one you wanted, I bought the three available spells.]

She could have found out by searching his conscience, but they had forbidden it in order to respect each other's privacy.

Indeed, Jake found the Aether Spells Compression lvl1, Fake Miniaturization lvl1 and True Miniaturization lvl1 at the bottom of his skill list. He would have time to try them once the Ordeal started.

Speaking of skills, his stats weren't the only thing that had changed over the year. To earn those 67 new Soul Glyphs, Jake had to pour his heart and soul into soaking up all the knowledge that they tried to force down his throat until he was sick of it.

All this knowledge had been etched into his brain, nerves and muscles, while his reflexes had been deconstructed to better accommodate all this data. It showed in his skills.

His list of skills and masteries were endless and each one had exceeded 200 points. For the record, 50 points was equivalent to a state degree, but the Oracle System labeled anything below that as Novice. From 50 to 100, one entered the rank of Beginner, and only after 100 points did it acknowledge their rank as Apprentice. At 200 points, one entered the Intermediate level.

His biggest gain this year was by far the following skill:

[Master of Arms: 206 points. (Intermediate level).You are an expert in the handling of all weapons who has transcended the boundaries of humanity. But on the scale of the Mirror Universe, you are still nothing.]

It sounded good, but to get the corresponding Soul Glyph Jake had been busting his ass for the past six months. Compared to the non-combat professions, this combat instructor was like an asura from the underworld. The Bronze Soul Glyph in question gave him a basic understanding and proficiency over any weapon in his hands, even for weapons he was wielding for the first time.

With his current intelligence and dexterity, it wasn't all that useful, but it might come in handy if it was a murky piece of technology or magical weaponry.

As Jake carried on painstakingly inspecting all the changes resulting from his year of seclusion, the long-awaited notification from the Oracle System finally popped up in his mind.

[Participant: Jake Wilderth, Silver Myrtharian.]

[Successful Ordeals: 3.]

[Awaiting matchmaking for Fourth Ordeal. Species allowed: All.]

[...]

[Matchmaking complete, Fourth Ordeal determined.]

[Type: Heroic-fantasy/Race Against Time]

[Aether density: *100 or 1000 pts.]

[Number of participants: 9,891,386.]

[Background:]

[Quanoth is the creative sandbox of the Ancient Designer Aerae, also known as the God of System. Everything that exists there, from the earth to the stars and their inhabitants, is a figment of his imagination. Each new play that Aerae imagines is only the invariant reiteration of the previous one. What is he looking for by this process? No one knows.]

[The opportunities that abound in this world with its peculiar rules become the perfect excuse to become a cruel playground for the valiant players who have proven themselves in the previous Three Ordeals.]

[Alas, each iteration of Quanoth is as ephemeral as a thought for Aerae. Every few thousand years, an unprecedented cataclysm called "The Purge" resets this world, destroying all remaining life forms.]

[However, aware of playing with lives and under pressure from the Oracle, the God of System has created an escape route for the inhabitants of Quanoth. When the end of the world approaches, the Celestial City, home of the Divine Academy will descend from the heavens to recruit anyone who proves worthy.]

[Unfortunately, the number of places is limited, so all kingdoms and even the fiends and beasts of the most remote seas and forests will stop at nothing to win their ticket to board this life-saving ark.]

[In this Ordeal, you are a Vagabond who has lived your whole life away from civilization after a certain past event and decides to come out of your solitude after learning by chance about the impending new Purge.]

[Because you were living as a hermit, you learned about the Divine Academy's descent too late and already missed the official recruitment period. The Celestial City is not heartless, however, and has volunteered a portion of its land. Those who failed or missed the official recruitment are free to claim these lands as they see fit.]

[Main Mission: Find a way to board the Celestial City before its departure. If you fail, you will be left to undergo the Purge with the rest of the damned.]

[Penalty for failure: None.]

[Benefits and Specifics during Mission Time:]

[-A new temporary identity to match your First Lieutenant's Oracle Rank.]

[-Your body and soul have been digitized according to the rules of Quanoth defined by the God of System, Aerae.]

[-Your Aether stats are suppressed by Quanoth and can neither grow nor exceed the local Aether Density.]

[May fate work in your favor.]

No sooner had Jake finished integrating all of this information than his soul was abruptly pulled into some sort of vacuum, and when he opened his eyes a mere blink later, an ordinary forest, shrieks of agony, and the clash of steel weapons greeted him with a bang.

While he was not yet fully aware of his new surroundings, a sharp breeze, followed by the swish of a blade flashed across his line of sight along with a furious roar,

"Die, monster!"

Without flinching, or even looking at his opponent, Jake clutched the blade flying towards his throat with two fingers as if it were a toothpick, but was surprised when it began to shimmer and chime, emitting a clear radiance. The sword began to vibrate with a mysterious force and the skin in contact with the blade began to tingle.

Still unfazed, Jake dropped the weapon and paralyzed his attacker with a glare. Literally. The individual fell back heavily to the ground while letting out a groan of pain.

Surprisingly, it was a human. A young boy barely older than Tim, only knee high. In an attempt to slit his throat, he had leapt high into the air. The teenager was scrawny and pale, but he wore an old chain mail that was too big for him and a claymore that he struggled to wield.

Despite this, he was not weak. Especially, his look had something desperate and zealous, like that of a starving ferocious beast ready to do anything to gnaw on a bone. People in such a state of desperation were completely unpredictable and dangerous.

"Do-don't kill me!" The child screamed in terror as he saw Jake take a step toward him.

Jake halted his step and looked up to see the battle coming to an end around him. A scene of gruesome carnage immediately made him frown.

"What crappy place have I stepped into again..." Jake grumbled inwardly before leaving the battlefield without looking back after turning invisible.

The army of monsters, aliens and humans alike kept slaughtering each other without noticing his existence.. Only one emaciated boy wearing chain mail too large for him stood dumbstruck, still in shock at having been spared.

Chapter 646 - Digitization

Once invisible, Jake did not walk away, but flew off in the air instead. His first destination to find his bearings and not be pestered was the sky. He was not afraid of the harsh atmospheric conditions, nor of the sidereal void. Once he was high enough, he would have the bird's eye view he wanted.

This time Jake did not feel the horrible sensation of becoming weaker and dumber, as had been the case at the beginning of the previous Ordeals. The Aether density was indeed 1000, but over the past year B842's Aether density had been rising steadily. The Aether density of both worlds was now very close.

Because of this, despite his skyrocketing stats, his mental abilities had actually decreased slightly over the past year, delaying his acquisition of new Soul Glyphs.

Jake could see why an Aetherist like Cekt with very high Aether stats would choose to exile himself to a backwater like B842. With such high Aether stats and low Aether density, their mental and physical abilities were multiplied compared to their home world.

Perhaps on their native world, and this was just his theory, the Oracle Guardians were just ordinary people.

The commotion of the battlefield quickly faded as he soared until it became a distant memory. The giant trees in the woods where he had first appeared grew smaller and smaller until they formed a uniform dark green carpet.

Propelling himself higher and faster with his telekinesis, he shot up several dozen kilometers in less than two minutes, but a high-pitched bird's yelp suddenly sounded near him.

Jake narrowly avoided the bird by flipping through the air before resuming his run. The huge three-headed beast yelped angrily at him to express its displeasure, but soon lost interest in the tiny human and resumed its course.

Seeing that he had had a close call, Jake ignored the cold sweat dripping down his forehead and continued his ascent. This unexpected encounter was the wake-up call he needed.

'This place is dangerous.'

This was an Ordeal, not a game. The watchword of an Ordeal was that it would always be challenging for its players.

Greater strength, being able to fly, being smarter? It simply meant that the dangers they would face and the difficulty of the missions would be greater and the rewards less bountiful.

Indeed, Jake soon realized during his soaring flight that his plan would not work so easily. Since he had crossed the threshold of the stratosphere, a layer of dark clouds as dense as soaked cotton had decided to block his path.

The build-up of electrical energy was terrifying and he wasted several Oracle Shields just to get through a few lightning bolts. Ironically, he who wanted to have a global view of the planet, could not see beyond the tip of his nose at all.

He persisted a little longer, and eventually managed to make his way out of the storm clouds at the cost of a few more Oracle Shields. He decided to stop there when he saw what was waiting for him above.

Some kind of weird magical or electromagnetic storm was raging, forming an impassable insulating belt around the planet. Yes, it was a planet. At least ten times larger than Jupiter according to his first impression.

These cottony black clouds didn't cover the whole planet, mercifully, but they did cover several thousand kilometers in all directions from his position, draping the forest below like a huge curtain. There were a few areas of stable clearing, as if the curtain of clouds had holes in it and was too broken to be sewn back together.

'The creativity of this God of System, Aurae leaves much to be desired.' Jake didn't mince his words as he gazed at the work of this eccentric Ancient Designer.

Along with Xion Zholvur, whom he had met in his Second Ordeal, and Zeldon, whom Cekt had mentioned a few months earlier, this was the third Ancient Designer he had heard of. Actually, the fourth if one included the Ancient Designer Aas mentioned by the Digestor Verxes at the end of his Third Ordeal.

Unlike Xion, who was the ultimate mystery of his Second Ordeal and practically a pariah, Aurae was literally the creator of this world and his role was clear to all involved.

"Xi, do you know this Aurae?" Jake asked his beloved Oracle AI.

An hour earlier she had no recollection of it, but the veil covering her memories had lifted as soon as they arrived on Quanoth. She reorganized what she knew for a few seconds, then said contritely,

[Not much. I know he invented the Soul Class and Aether Encoding technology. The Oracle Status displayed today by all your Oracle Devices has a lot to do with him. It is even said that he programmed the Oracle System himself. His thing is to define the rules and see what happens next. If it weren't for the Oracle and the other Ancient Designers who refrain him, this guy would be a danger to the Mirror Universe.]

"Great! Another weirdo at the top of the Mirror Universe hierarchy." Jake quipped sardonically.

On Earth, they gave nuclear codes to megalomaniac dictators and presidents. Next to that, the Ancient Designers' psychological disorders were a joke... Or was it the other way around?

If Quanoth was a simulated world like that of Asfrid's Black Tablet, perhaps time passed so quickly for Auae that each iteration of this world really did last a breath in his mind.

[If I were you, I'd take a look at your Oracle Status instead. This world has special rules and your body has been digitized, I recall. You should feel different...] Xi chided him with a slightly excited tone.

"Hmm?" From her thrumming voice, Xi must have been wanting to broach the subject for a while now.

Now that he had time to sit back and think, Jake admitted that he did feel different. His body felt "more real", more "in sync", strange as that may sound, but at the same time the whole world felt more fake.

A glance at his new Oracle Status made him understand why:

[Level: 28 (Digitized)]

[Species: Silver Myrtharian (sub-human species)]

[Class: Jobless]

[HP: 10000 (Regen: 182.7HP/min)]

[MP: 0]

[Strength : 960]

[Agility: 505]

[Constitution: 1000]

[Vitality: 775]

[Intelligence: 273]

[Perception: 571]

[Extrasensory Perception: 252]

[Luck: 34]

[Reference for an adult human jobless level 1: HP:10, stats: 1 .]

Jake was slack-jawed at the end of his reading. He reread it three times to make sure he wasn't hallucinating.

"So this is what it means to be digitized." Jake sighed with a comical expression. "On Quanoth, the body and mind are one, but it is the mind that determines the level and attributes of an individual. Everything that exists here is basically in a semi-soul state, straddling the line between reality and illusion. Because my Aether stats are restricted, I have no advantage on that side and I can't control them either. On the other hand, I can still control the Aether in the atmosphere, but there are dozens of other energy sources floating around. Presumably, that's what's powering these MPs. Mine are at 0. I guess because I'm missing a class or a specific organ like my Aether Soul Core, which is also gone."

He was tempted to stab himself to see how much the digitization reflected his old stats. What was certain was that he was recovering more slowly from his injuries here, but depending on their nature that could be an advantage.

BANG!

After punching himself in the face with enough force to smash a tank, his HP meter briefly dropped by one point, but rebounded a few seconds later, leaving no trace. More confident, he slashed his chest and scratched his heart with one of his long translucent claws.

[-10 HP]

[-1HP]

[-1HP]

[-1HP]

[-1HP]

Jake breathed a sigh of relief. As he had hoped, a heart injury was not considered fatal. It would have been a problem if it was.

If he had understood Digitization correctly, even a large hole in the head would not necessarily be fatal if the body's regenerative abilities were able to keep up. The extra 4 points lost were due to bleeding. This was also associated with a "weakened" status, but nothing too bad.

On the other hand, in this semi-Soul State, he also had the bad feeling that dying here would have much more severe consequences than in the previous Ordeals. Any physical injury would be reflected in his Spirit Body and perhaps even his Soul because of their high level of fusion.

"I need more information." Jake inhaled a large puff of local ozone to regroup himself.

[If you want information, the battle downstairs should be about to end. You'd better hurry, if you want to interview someone.] Xi teased him sweetly, pointing to the thick layer of dark clouds obscuring the huge forest below them.

So Jake raced back to the planet, forcing his way through the thick curtain of clouds at the cost of a few more electrocutions intercepted by an Oracle Shield.

When he returned to the battlefield, the winner had been decided and it was not the humans. A motley crew of aliens, each more hideous than the last, were already scavenging the battlefield, even devouring the victims of both sides.

Upon seeing the 4 meter giant land, all the aliens and monsters still alive scattered, whimpering in fright, to his utmost dismay.

'Whatever... That suits me.' Inwardly, he was rather offended. Now even the monsters were afraid of him.

Miraculously, the boy Jake had spared was still alive. What he didn't know was that it wasn't a coincidence. By sparing him earlier, the other aliens had decided to ignore him too, refusing to touch his prey. It was engrained in their instincts to submit to the strong.

"Hey, what's up?" Jake crouched down in front of the traumatized boy, flashing his biggest smile, revealing his long, translucent 100% carnivorous fangs in the process.

At the sight of them, the child warrior fainted on the spot.

Chapter 647 - Handsome Me Is Back

SPLASH!

A bucket of water later, the fainting boy jolted awake from his nightmare, only to come face to face with the exact entity his nightmare was about. He almost passed out again.

"Aaaaaargh! Don't kill me!"

Hearing it squeal horrendously like a pig at the slaughterhouse, Jake was momentarily tempted to grant the exact opposite of his wish. Wincing as he plugged his ears, he snarled menacingly through his teeth, the growl emanating from his throat somewhere between a roar and the purr of a car.

He wasn't even aware of how utterly creepy his actions were.

And not surprisingly, the boy immediately fell silent as if he had just swallowed a fly. His breaths were so shallow, on the other hand, that Jake was genuinely worried that he might pass out from hypoxia again.

"Breathe." Jake ordered coldly as he scowled at him. The good news was that the teenager understood Oraclean. It explained why he hadn't gotten a language kit this time.

"AHHH!" The boy, realizing he was suffocating, took a noisy breath.

His lungs revived, he didn't dare stop breathing in and out for fear that the monster haunting his nightmares would no longer be satisfied and decide to kill him for good.

"Relax." Jake rolled his eyes, tossing him a chocolate bar from his Space Storage to calm him down. "Eat."

The boy in chain mail jumped as if he had just yelled at him, but quickly put the treat in his mouth without removing the plastic wrapper. A retching made him cough back the saliva-soaked wrapper, but his terror got the better of him and he forced himself to chew the plastic as best he could.

"Damn it! Don't tell me I've stumbled upon a complete moron. I should have saved someone else..." Jake snarled aloud with a twitchy face.

"Do-don't kill me!" The boy panicked again as he heard him mumble under his breath as if he didn't exist.

Jake glanced at him disparagingly and sneered,

"In that case, start acting normal and stop trying to eat the wrapper. When you eat a banana, do you eat the skin with it? When you eat at home, do you also eat your plate and cutlery?"

The kid froze suddenly. Realizing his stupidity, he took the crushed bar in its plastic wrapping out of his mouth and examined more closely what he was stupidly trying to swallow. Exasperated, Jake absentmindedly waved his hand to remove the wrapper with his telekinesis and tossed the chocolate mush inside tens of meters away for the bugs and birds to enjoy.

He pulled out a second chocolate bar, which he tossed once again to the boy.

"This time, eat it properly."

This time, the teenager didn't hesitate and tore the wrapper off himself with his teeth before biting into the chocolate bar. His eyes suddenly widened as the delicious taste and texture exploded on his taste buds. As if a switch had been flipped, he began to frantically devour the rest of the snack, leaving only the wrapper behind a short while later.

As he finished his snack, the kid wasn't so scared anymore and his hungry, hopeful eyes looked at him with a "Is there any more?" attitude.

Jake, having reached his goal, chuckled as he dangled a third chocolate bar in front of the boy. The brat's eyes remained transfixed on the food, obsessively tracking its swaying movements.

He wasn't proud of exploiting a freaked-out kid's hunger to achieve his ends, but it was an effective plan and it was better than torture and persecution.

"If you answer my questions, you can eat as much as you want." Jake factually announced his deal.

Contrary to what he imagined, the child didn't even pretend to hesitate and nodded his head vehemently.

"Good. First of all, what's your name?" Jake asked.

"Trash."

"Excuse me?" Jake nearly choked on his own spit.

"Trash Runt. First name is Trash, last name is Runt." The kid declared loudly, even a little proud.

Jake was speechless.

"Who gave you that name?" He was curious.

"Uncle Oaf."

"And who is this Uncle Oaf?"

"The leader of our mercenary gang." The child answered honestly, before he began to sob inconsolably.

Jake did not ask where this uncle was. The entire gang of mercenaries were either rotting in the nearby field or were already in the stomachs of the monsters that had caused their deaths. This uncle Oaf with a dubious sense of names lay most likely among them.

"So, where are we?" Once the child had quieted down, Jake finally asked the burning question.

The awkwardly named Trash momentarily forgot his sadness at receiving such an absurd question. He wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, but at least he knew where they were. Even without the other mercenaries, he could find his way back.

Noticing the peculiar glint in the kid's eye lingering on him, Jake flaunted his thick skin and barked, "Just answer the question."

A question-and-answer game with the same questioner and the same answerer then ensued between a giant and a child. After a short, but concise interrogation, Jake finally made sense of his situation.

"So, I'm really in a shithole... The Oracle has screwed me over again..." Jake let out a dismal sigh, remarkably unmoved by the revelations.

Trash Runt lived up to his name. He was an incompetent and moronic orphan. In his defense, it wasn't his fault. The rest of his mercenary gang was cut from the same cloth and what they all had in common was their unparalleled level of illiteracy. With the exception of the late Uncle Oaf as their leader who could read, all of these mercenaries were illiterate.

Consequently, if Trash knew where they were, he didn't know much more. He knew about the Divine Academy's descent and the impending end of the world like everyone else, but he only viewed the short-term consequences, namely the endless onslaught of monsters on his city and the news of wars being waged everywhere.

According to the teenager's limited knowledge, they were at the southernmost tip of a huge continent, in the Icarden Province, itself part of a vast human empire, the Empire of Ret'Asi. Beyond was an endless ocean that no sailor had ever crossed completely. This ocean was separated from civilization by the vast forest in which they were currently talking, which also flanked most of their borders.

This planet was simply gigantic and Trash only knew the few hundred kilometers where his gang used to operate. He had only visited a small part of the Icarden Province, which according to his claims was about as big as Eurasia.

This Icarden Province was in fact a loose federation of free and independent cities divided between many local overlords and tyrants. Among them were nobles, former heroes, fallen kings and queens, but also famous criminals who had fled the empire.

The unique feature of Icarden and the empire it was vassal to, Ret'Asi, was that it was a territory mostly populated by human-looking races. Humans, elves, fairies, dwarves, hobbits, all the clichés of fantasy could be found there, but with a much wider morphological variability.

Despite this surface tolerance, racism and discrimination were strongly present and an inhuman giant like Jake was not welcome everywhere, except in Icarden Province, which in the end was perhaps not just bad luck.

"Am I that terrifying?" Jake took offense when the kid looked down after mentioning the problem with his appearance.

[You should take a good look at yourself in the mirror] Xi giggled in his head.

"Hmm..."

Surprisingly, he found one in his Space Storage. Jake could be quite the narcissist from time to time when he wasn't training. It was the very reason he often complained about his growth spurts.

His face broke down as he saw his reflection in the mirror. After a year of training without a break, his height was now the least of his worries.

How to put it... Nature had reclaimed its rights.

His bloodline was more pumped up than ever and with no one to be concerned about over the past year, Jake had made no effort to curb it. Because of his recent Digitization merging his body and mind, his Myrtharian attributes had completely taken over.

In addition to his towering height, his lean, defined muscles shimmered like bronze, while his lava veins, now a golden orange, constantly showed through his skin. His galactic eyes were like two vortexes of white and golden light giving him a transcendental presence. His translucent fangs were more pronounced and his claws were longer than ever. During the year, he had made no effort to groom himself and his silver mane and beard with golden streaks fell freely to his waist.

Yep, he was definitely a monster.

Aware of the problem, the boy's and the other monsters' fright no longer seemed so unreasonable. Focusing, he lowered his body temperature and retracted his aura until he looked human again, or mostly so.

He was still four meters tall and still looked like a giant hobo. A handsome hobo, yes, but a hobo nonetheless. It did, however, fit in wonderfully with his identity as a Vagabond.

Trash was shocked to see him revert to a near-human appearance, but the surprise didn't end there. Jake then activated his new skill Fake Miniaturization.

[Fake Miniaturization lvl1: Allows you to compress matter up to 50% of its original size by exerting an even force on each particle of the object. The pressure is no longer directly felt, although damage may occur, and is therefore compatible with use on living beings. Cost : 5B Aether points.]

Unlike True Miniaturization, where matter was converted to Aether and thus his physical abilities were diminished, here he retained his abilities, but at the cost of extremely harsh constraints on his body.

His body was quickly compressed to a size of about 1m90. Now he would have no problem passing for human. Seeing his reflection in the mirror this time, Jake almost burst into tears from the overwhelming emotion.

'Girls, get ready to wet your panties! the handsome me is finally back!'

As he made this shameless statement, Jake thought he heard a scornful snort somewhere in his mind.

Chapter 648 - Huge Mistake

The brat known as Trash then sat there in a state of utter daze as Jake groomed himself with a pair of scissors he had forged in his spare time, cutting his hair in a new style that was more to his liking, then shaving as best as he could with one of his claws. He then donned new clothes at his size, taking the opportunity to wear the New Earth armor that hadn't been fitting him for ages.

Once satisfied with the result, Jake gave his most charming smile to the mirror, and jokingly said to the teenager,

"Still scary, huh?"

Refusing to tread on this minefield, the youngster swallowed with difficulty and begged in a shy whisper,

"...chocolate."

"What?"

"Can I have chocolate again?" He gathered his courage and asked in a more confident voice.

"Oh, knock yourself out." Jake smiled as he tossed him the rest of the package.

While Trash filled his belly, Jake returned to the previous crime scene. The kid had mentioned a card in Uncle Oaf's possession. If his corpse hadn't been eaten or looted, his stuff must still be out there.

There were still a few scavengers and flesh-eating monsters around, and when they saw him appear back in a shape easier to the eye, they didn't make the connection with the spooky giant from earlier.

An out-of-sorts avian alien, which could have been the offspring of a sow copulating with a crow, pounced on him with its jagged beak stretched wide open to chomp down on him, but all it bit into was the studded metal of a large boot.

Bang!

"Fuck off!" Jake roared as he retracted his leg.

He had no patience with this kind of nuisance.

Now that he had regained a more human appearance and his aura was contained, he wasn't as daunting. One couldn't have everything in life. Choices must be made.

As for the raven-like alien, thanks to its long flexible neck, its head remained attached somehow to its shoulders, but its face and beak caved in, its eyeballs imploded under the pressure while the back of its head violently slammed into its tailbone...

It couldn't be more dead.

Gulp!

The other aliens and beasts that tried to attack him shriveled up, one of them even defecating on itself. No more monsters came near him after this incident.

The battlefield had spread far and wide and searching for that map could have wasted a lot of time if he didn't have his Oracle Device. One scan later, he found Uncle Oaf, or whatever was left of him.

The mercenary gang leader also lived up to his name. He was a slightly balding man in his fifties who was fat enough to be described as morbidly obese. In this physically demanding environment, where their lives were constantly on the line, this was a feat requiring more than just "discipline", but also some form of foolhardiness.

Unfortunately, this time, his overweight and the concomitant slowness had probably brought him down. He had been bled to death by his many wounds and no doubt these monsters had tasted his flesh while he was still alive, as evidenced by his wrathful and disgruntled face.

These attackers must have found the taste unsatisfactory, perhaps the meat was too greasy or boozy, because they had not kept devouring him after his death. His killers were not after his equipment either. This was lucky for him, or he would have needed to expend his energy hunting them down for a measly piece of parchment.

Ignoring the other monsters feeding on their victims, Jake impatiently unfolded the parchment and finally got a clear picture of where he was. This map was limited to the Ret'Asi Empire, but that was enough for now.

There were 16 provinces in total, but that was of no importance to him. What he wanted to know was how far away he was from the Celestial City. Sadly, according to Trash it was not in their empire, but much further north.

For the kid who was already surviving by the day, the end of the world was too abstract a concept. Even this Uncle Oaf didn't know any better.

His instincts told him that just getting to the city in time would be a major challenge.

The map did show the outline of the empire's border countries as well as prominent cities, and that gave him a definite direction.

He currently had three options. Continue immediately west to leave the empire forever and enter the state of Khinchod, a nation populated by non-humans, or join one of the two nearest large cities of Icarden, named Lodunvals and Laudarkvik.

The location of these two cities was no accident. The few holes in the dark cloud curtain covering this planetary area that let the sun shine through were precisely the locations chosen for these two cities.

Lodunvals was brightly lit and conveniently located, whereas Laudarkvik was only sunny for one or two hours a day and close to the Wilderness. For ordinary humans, the choice was easy.

The Wilderness was any land populated by monsters over which the many civilized states had no jurisdiction or control. The civilized world formed by a coalition of empires and kingdoms of many races was only a tiny, explored and known part of a much larger world. Even within the states themselves, the Icarden Province being a prime example, the Wilderness took up a significant chunk of their territory.

The big agglomerating cities like Lodunvals and Laudarkvik used the numerous guilds and the untarnished reputation of their Aurae Cathedral to issue orders for missions and quests that many desperate adventurers and mercenaries like this gang would eagerly complete. Often at the cost of their lives.

Trash had personally only visited Lodunvals, which was still more or less civilized, but Laudarkvik was more suitable for mutants like Jake. On the flip side, this city and the territory under its jurisdiction was practically outlawed. Without sufficient strength, it was better to never set foot there or accept the prospect of losing your life and worse at any moment.

Having found what he was looking for, Jake went back to the teenager, who was done with his meal based on the pile of plastic wrappers lying on the floor. So much for his environmental aspirations. This planet clearly had more pressing concerns.

Recognizing the object in Jake's hands, the youngster shuddered.

"Un-Uncle Oaf?" He asked with vain hope.

"Dead." Jake replied impassively. He didn't have time to sugarcoat a brat.

Against all odds, Trash did not start crying again. He had clearly seen the fat man succumb to his wounds through his very own eyes. It was impossible to survive that. Just that when he saw the map, he had nevertheless felt a surge of hope, which was soon overtaken by reality.

With the orphan pointing north, Jake didn't even need to use his Shadow Guide to find his way. With the help of the map, the duo set off.

Before leaving, Jake had offered to retrieve the uneaten corpses of the other mercenaries from his gang so that their families could give them a proper funeral, but Trash testified that this was unnecessary and burdensome.

This gang was not at the bottom of the social adventurer hierarchy, but not that far from the worst. They were an F-level group of adventurers, with the lowest level going as low as H.

Individually, each of these mercenaries also had their own level of accreditation, and their former leader was only an E-level himself. Trash Runt was about to become an F-level adventurer, so he was technically still a peak G-level one.

According to the official Guild of Adventurers classification, this meant that this gang was barely competent enough for simple escorting or fending off mobs and animals attacking herds and villages. Trash could take out the small beasts of the Wilderness in single combat and had a fair chance against a newly born goblin or two.

In peacetime, these mediocre skills were all they needed to make a living, but these days they've become inadequate. Laid-back missions like escorting herbalists on their hike through the forest had turned into "Repel the monster horde from somewhere for a pittance."

It was hardly a joke. Between the wars and large-scale monster invasions flooding in from the Wilderness every day by the millions, Icarden Province's defensive capabilities had been stretched to the limit, as had their food resources.

Protecting a flock of sheep from an ordinary stray wolf, even from a pack, was no small task for professionals. Defending the same herd from 25,000 monsters when there were only 36 of them was a different matter altogether...

Listening to the kid's depressing rant, Jake could only silently sympathize.

'The true mystery is why all these monsters decided to attack such a remote province.' Jake thought inwardly, striving to remain positive.

[It's not exactly a mystery, I think it makes perfect sense, in fact.] Xi abruptly disagreed with him.

Jake quickly regarded the matter from all angles and concurred.

The ultimate goal of every living thing on this planet was to get on board the Celestial City, including himself. With official recruitment over, there had to be other legitimate ways to be accepted into the Divine Academy, but the easiest way was simply to claim a piece of land in the Celestial City.

His Ordeal synopsis stated that a section of the flying island had been allocated to the other survivors and that they could share it as they saw fit. Intuitively, one might assume that all they had to do was hurry up and claim a piece of the island before all the spots were taken.

A huge mistake.

Chapter 649 - Steles

No one knew exactly when the Celestial City would depart, nor when the end of the world would occur. It could be a week, a month or a century from now. His Main Mission didn't include a time frame, but the Race Against Time theme was a clear indication that he'd better get his ass in gear.

Anyone who moved to the Celestial City too soon would have to fend off the relentless onslaught of millions of desperate migrants. No matter how strong they were, if the oncoming waves of attacks continued unabated for too long, the best warriors would eventually succumb from exhaustion.

This planet was huge. Champions and monsters at the top of the power ladder must have been tens, if not hundreds of thousands. Those considered mighty enough to become local tyrants, but not quite powerful enough to dominate the world, probably numbered in the millions.

The knock-on effect was that those with true personal or military power to claim a piece of the island would wait until the last possible moment before boarding to minimize the amount of enemies to be fought and the length of those battles.

But that didn't mean that those survivors on borrowed time had to sit back and wait for the final day. There was a realistic way to increase their chances and it had already begun.

The monster invasions and wars raging everywhere were the epitome of this. Although many also liked to take advantage of chaos and anarchy, forcing monsters and heroes to kill each other was by far the safest way to permanently reduce the number of rivals.

All those wretched monsters and mercenaries, those soldiers desperately fighting against each other, were only pawns and cannon fodder for other figureheads who probably hadn't even moved a finger yet. Once their numbers were sufficiently reduced, they would take action.

To adopt this strategy, however, they needed to know when the Celestial City would leave, or if not, the exact date of the apocalypse.

"Did the Auras clergy tell you how long the Celestial City would remain in this world?" Jake asked the youngster as he walked. They could have flown, but it would have been harder for them to chat.

To his disappointment, the boy wracked his brains over the question for a long time, his index finger resting on his chin in a silly pose. His answer came out even more underwhelming.

"I think it was a year or two? Unless it was a month or two?" He stammered as he sought his approval with his eyes.

"Why are you answering me in a quizzical tone?" Jake's face scrunched up in annoyance. "I was the one who asked you the question. So obviously I don't know the answer. It's not a test."

The teenager shivered like a hare flushed out by a predator, but he sputtered back anyway,

"These are the Cathedral oracles who deliver the god Auae's prophecies and reserve to themselves the right to interpret them. One hears everything and its opposite from their mouths and it is said that only the major Archbishops and the cardinals know what it is really about. For a reliable answer, only a member of the Divine Academy can answer you."

"A prophecy? Do people believe in this crap?" Jake blurted out with contempt.

A dumbfounded, not to say appalled expression flashed across the child's pale face as he heard the blasphemous words. As expected from a fearless monster. He did not even fear the fury of a god!

The truth was not that Jake did not fear Auae, but that he knew full well that this prophecy was just a sham. Although for him it was a mere Ordeal, for them it was truly doomsday.

Turning his head furiously around to make sure an intruder wasn't spying on them, Trash whispered nervously with a conspiratorial snicker,

"The prophecies the priests tell us and their interpretations, Uncle Oaf always said they were a bunch of hooey and that those priests reciting them were just charlatans. On the other hand, the original Auae prophecy, no one dares to question it."

"What initial prophecy? It remains a bombastic litany uttered by another breathing being." Jake refuted dismissively. "Unless Auae himself recites it, I'm afraid it's still quackery."

"You've never heard Auae's prophecy? I thought even monsters had heard of it!" The teenager was no longer just shocked this time, but downright frightened, though with a strange rush of anticipation.

"Should I?" Jake was far too lazy to come up with a half-baked lie. If the kid gave him any trouble over this, he'd let nature take its course, dumping him back in the middle of a monster horde.

The good news was that Trash had a strong will to live, and he at least had the ability to recognize the blunders to avoid.

"Ahem, you should..." The youngster corrected him forthrightly. "For one thing because everyone heard it in their heads when the Celestial City appeared. The other reason is that unless you've been living in a cave since the dawn of time, it's impossible not to have come across one of the Prophetic Steles. The planet is littered with them, even the Wilderness. They are indestructible and can be found near all important water sources, hilltops and mountains. There would even be some at the bottom of the ocean."

Jake suddenly gasped.

"Are these steles that incredible?" At the same time, he mentally asked Xi, 'Is it possible to churn out a prophecy of this magnitude for an Ancient Designer?'

[It depends on what kind of prophecy we're talking about.] She replied allusively. [If this is a true prediction involving many living beings, there are very few individuals in the Mirror Universe who can accurately predict the future over so many years. Although Auras is an Ancient Designer, he is not necessarily capable of this.]

[However, these steles appear to be extremely ancient. If they were not created with this world's new reiteration, then it may be that the end of the world doesn't destroy everything, but only the living beings and the traces of their passage on this earth. In this case, these steles would not really be prophecies, but simply a record of a phenomenon that is constantly recurring on this planet. Even if Auras destroys almost everything with each iteration, he must have left a few clues here and there for the new natives to have a chance to prepare themselves.]

"Do you know where any of these steles are?" Jake questioned the teenager. "Unless you can recite it by heart."

He was more pessimistic about that second alternative. So far, the kid hadn't given him the impression of having a brilliant intellect.

"There's a stele in front of every major city's cathedral. Trash revealed before proudly boasting, "And yes, I can recite the prophecy! I don't know much, for sure, but Uncle Oaf forced me to recite it so many times that it's forever etched in my noggin."

The teenager modestly put his fist in front of his mouth to clear his throat, then began to declaim,

"When the celestial city descends from the heavens, the day it opens its gates shall bring forth broken friendships and an aeon of brutality.

The chosen ones will be welcomed as kings, while the renegades will be sentenced to carnage and damnation.

As stormy ash cover the sky, the guilty, knowledgeable of what no one knows and ignorant of all that is known, strong but classless, shall bring forth an age of inhumanity and depravity.

Blood shall be shed, empires shall fall, until the last heroes turned villains claim their place in glory.

It shall be then, when the purifying flames fall on Quanoth, that the old shall become the new again, ushering in a new age."

Dead silence.

Jake stayed blown away for a short while before coming to his senses. This prophecy was short but instructive!

The guilty ones were obviously the Players. They knew things that no one else knew, but ignored basic truths that even a child could recite.

His ignorance of this prophecy, which was on par with knowing the name of one's own country's president on Earth, had instantly blown his cover.

And indeed, now that the teen had overcome his fright and broken the ice, he followed up with another accusatory-like question.

"Ahem... What's your class, sir? Someone as powerful as you must have an exceptional class like Berserker, Great Hero or something..."

The corner of Jake's lips twitched at the question, but he wasn't afraid of anything or anyone on Quanoth.

'So what, if they find out I'm an intruder? They're too busy killing each other to care about me. Still, from now on I'll be more careful once I'm in town. I'd better get a Soul Class as soon as possible to avoid suspicion.'

[Side Mission n°1 : Acquire at least one Soul Class. The rating will depend on the Soul Class(es) obtained at the end of the Ordeal.]

He laughed wryly. The Oracle seemed to agree with him.

When he received no response from Jake, the kid took his silence as an admission and did not insist. When he intended to stick to his doubts, the 'guilty' indifferently admitted his crimes.

"Hey Trash, how do you get a Soul Class?"

Chapter 650 - Soul Class

The path to acquiring a Soul Class turned out to be much more straightforward than he assumed. On Quanoth, Digitization merged body and soul and this had as many cons as pros.

The downside was vulnerability. On Quanoth, few believed in an afterlife, let alone a heaven or hell. A destroyed body meant a destroyed or at least damaged soul.

The souls that survived their death would literally become undead or tormented ghosts, rehashing their regrets and last wishes. Some were able to regain a normal life, which could be viewed as a second lease on life, but this would irrevocably end with the doomsday foretold by the prophecy.

The perks, though he could have guessed, were unexpected... and welcome.

Soul and body being highly synchronized, they affected each other. Furthermore, Quanoth's world laws had been enacted in such a way that this singular aspect was fully exploited.

Every action and thought on Quanoth had consequences that were far more perennial and irreversible than in the rest of the Mirror Universe.

What the heck did that really mean?

Well, roughly speaking, that a guy who liked to train with swords and very emotionally invested would eventually awaken a Soul Skill like: Beginner Swordsmanship, then other auxiliary Skills like Stab, Slash, Cleave, Hack, Parry ect...

This resonance depended on their Soul Power, and therefore Spirit Body level. As for the body and the Aether Skills, the Spirit Body had a limit of Soul Skills it could support.

As a result, early skills and even Soul Classes could be awakened relatively easily, usually before the age of 12 for natives of this world. By contrast, if their level stagnated, awakening new skills would become increasingly difficult.

A curious and restless child could very well awaken various Soul Skills such as "Running", "Painting", "Lying", "Drawing", "Singing", etc. But these many incompatible Soul Skills would eventually limit his potential.

Of course, it was not enough to do something to awaken the corresponding Soul Skill. It required a genuine commitment of mind and dedication.

This brought us to Soul Class awakening. Jake initially thought that Soul Glyphs and Soul Classes were a blessing, but he was more leery now.

Because ultimately a Soul Class was like a Bloodline for the body. Could engraving Aether Runes on one's soul really be so harmless? Afraid not.

The Soul Glyphs forged by a professional Aetherist like the ones in his Purgatory were comparable to knowledge for the brain. Knowing how to speak Italian didn't mean that one would start craving pasta or pizza all the time. They were relatively harmless and, on the face of it, only beneficial.

But a Soul Class was something else. A Swordsman would end up developing a calm and sharp personality. An Ice Mage would become cold and detached. A Fire Mage a more explosive and fierce temperament and so on.

This was a reality of Quanoth that the natives of this world simply accepted without challenging it. The only reason Trash knew all this was because it was super easy to verify. Everyone he had ever known or knew had a personality consistent with their Class.

Of course there were variations, a Soul Class was not everything, but its influence on individuals was much stronger than elsewhere.

Even on Earth, practicing a profession for decades could shape stereotypical personalities strongly influenced by their professional environment.

Except that on Earth, in most cases the vocation had been deliberately chosen. On Quanoth, the Soul Class made this choice for them and eventually transformed their mentality to fit the requirements of the profession.

Building on these fundamentals, there were therefore two commonly accepted methods of awakening a Soul Skill or Soul Class.

The first was the previously mentioned method of repeating an action or routine with spirit until their efforts were rewarded with the corresponding Soul Skill or Soul Class.

This was the ideal way, because it was a gradual process and the Soul Class was a fair reflection of the individual's personality. In this case, it was just like on Earth, the calling and passion that led to the job and not the other way around.

Tragically, as on Earth, there were many people on Quanoth who had complicated childhoods or who simply had no particular passion. There were others who had so many different hobbies and interests that it was impossible for a Soul Class to emerge.

This is where the Prophetic Steles came in. Prominently displayed in front of every chapel, church and cathedral in Aerae, all one had to do was touch them to obtain a Soul Class.

Unlike natural awakening by repetition and vocation, these displayed a list of Soul Classes to choose from, unique to each individual and based on their experiences, accomplishments, skills and to some extent personality.

Using the analogy of a certain wizard's magic hat with a lightning bolt scar on his forehead, a House could be more in keeping with a character, but the wizard was free to make the final choice.

Since Jake had not awakened any Soul Class when he arrived on Quanoth, despite his many Soul Glyphs, it was only natural that he would go with the second option.

His case did not surprise him at all. Between his Myrtharian Soul having several elemental attributes, his numerous Soul Glyphs and his jaded and cynical personality, it was difficult for him to marvel or feel any form of passion.

Generally speaking, a task could take up all of his time and mind, but only because it was an emergency or because he got some much-needed benefit or immediate pleasure from it. It couldn't really be called a passion or his first Soul Class would have been Ordeal Player or Soul Glyph Collector.

Thankfully, his disgraceful past was not taken into account, or perhaps he had changed a lot this past year, or he could have picked up a much less flattering Soul Class like "Godly Wanker" or "Procrastination God".

Intrigued, and out of a childish desire to compare himself to someone weaker than him, Jake scanned the teenager with his bracelet.

[Level: 7 (Digitized)]

[Species: Half-Leprechaun (human)]

[Class: Mercenary (10% of basic attributes per level)]

[HP: 7.5 (Regen: 0.38HP/d)]

[MP: 0]

[Strength: 0.75]

[Agility: 1.19]

[Constitution: 0.75]

[Vitality: 1.5]

[Intelligence: 1.2]

[Perception: 1.5]

[Extrasensory Perception: 0]

[Luck: 0]

[Reference for an adult human jobless level 1: HP:10, stats: 1]

[Class-related skills: Beginner swordsmanship, Beginner bowmanship, Beginner shieldmanship, Beginner axemanship, Beginner equipment maintenance]

[Other skills: Sneak, Dodge, Escape, Run, Cooking, Alcohol Resistance]

The difference between their two statuses was like an unbridgeable chasm.

"Hey, Trash. Do you have a way in this world to know your level and attributes?" Jake asked frankly, abandoning any thought of clearing himself. "I mean, a way to measure your abilities."

He needed to know, what understanding the natives of this world had of their Digitalization. The term attribute didn't ring a bell for the teen, but levels and abilities did.

"The Icarden Province uses a special Magic Machine to test our abilities, but these performance tests are expensive." The kid explained obediently. "It's reserved for the big guilds, the army, and certain academies. If you had asked me six months ago, I wouldn't have known how to answer, but because of the advent of the Celestial City and the prophecy, border and city entrance and exit checks have been tightened.

"One morning, the Lodunvals Mages Guild sent out an order to all inhabitants to come and get their identities recorded by their magical devices and we received an Identity Card that we have to carry at all times. You pay a fine if you are caught without one. Newcomers must also be tested and get their ID card before being admitted to the city. For regulars, you are required to show and update your ID card every time you go out of town. They have a magical device created specifically for this purpose."

Jake frowned upon hearing this. This was likely to cause him some trouble.

"Can you show me what this ID card looks like?" He smiled gently as he held out his open hand, but the teen shuddered when he saw this devil trying to coax him with some human expressions.

Plop.

Without needing to insist, a metal object fell into his outstretched hand. Jake grasped the card between his fingers and lifted it in front of his face to examine it up close. Rectangular and as large as a child's fist, the object looked like a credit card. Turning it over, he noticed several lines of writing in an unfamiliar alphabet. The natives of this world spoke Oraclean, but had their own way of writing it.

'Fuck, another troublesome thing.' Jake grunted inwardly as he handed the card back to the child.

"Can you read me what it says on the back?" He asked anyway.

"I can't read."

"Great... As expected from Trash." Jake's shoulders slumped in discouragement.

The teenager had told him earlier that he was illiterate, but he had at least hoped that he would be interested enough in his own identity to know what was written on it. Except for Auraa's prophecy, his education was close to nothing and he didn't appear to care about fixing that shortcoming...

On the way, Jake and Trash came across several groups of adventurers and mercenaries as well as a company of infantry from the empire doing a round of extermination. They were also attacked by

handfuls of hungry or reckless monsters and creatures, but a glance from Jake was enough to make them retreat every time. Those too dumb to sense the danger paid with their lives.

At dusk, they formally left the Wilderness, returning to civilized territory, but for Jake the atmosphere was no better. Torches and lanterns glowed in the distance, but the villages they passed were smoldering ruins and haunts of bandits and drug addicts.

"Truly a shithole...." Jake lampooned as he plodded on.