

Oracle 721

Chapter 721: Ruthless With Himself

[How do you plan to train this time?] Xi sounded him out in all seriousness. [You've been training hard all year, and your physical attributes are already unusually high for a Fourth Ordeal Player. You have no shortage of skills either. Between your Bloodline abilities, your numerous Soul Glyphs and your new Soul Class you also have great versatility. Your Spirit Body is not weak either and you have already awakened your True Will.

[If I had to point out one weak point, it would be that none of your many abilities are really outstanding. The might you develop with it is only the result of your excellent intelligence and perception, but on Quanoth you are not the only genius with excellent stats. Your Grade 9 Bloodline would have made you an almost unmatched Player in any other Ordeal, but on Quanoth that puts you in the top tier at best.

[If you had years to train, because some of the Players are even more talented than you, and with even better Bloodlines, you still wouldn't be guaranteed to surpass them. Even if it were possible, those years spent training instead of completing your Ordeal Missions, would end up impacting your overall rating heavily. Especially since you don't have several years, but at best a few weeks or months.]

"And I'm well aware of all that." Jake replied calmly. "Last night's battles made me realize that the hard way."

[Oh? So what are you going to do?] She asked in a slightly surprised voice, with a hint of anticipation.

Jake closed his eyes, thoughtfully running his fingers over the smooth skin where the Runes that had allowed him to defeat the Alpha Were-Eagle had been incised. Then opening them wide again, he grinned,

"You made me choose this Soul Class for a reason, right? Every Ordeal has a theme and the one in Quanoth is the Soul. As you just said, my Body Stats are already extremely high compared to the extreme majority of natives and participants. I would even go so far as to say that no human native of this planet has physical attributes superior to mine if they were deprived of their Soul Class. It is their Spirit Body and the amplifying coefficient of their Soul Class that makes the difference.

" In this situation, my objective is clear. In the short term, if I want to progress quickly, I must leave the training of my body aside and concentrate on my Spirit Body. The Words of Power of my Rune Engraver Soul Class are rather simple to use and control, but the strain of willpower and mental energy is proportional to the greatness of the wish. After defeating the Alpha Were-Eagle, I was on the verge of fainting and barely able to fight. All the more reason to train my Spirit Body and my will. Aside from doing some experimentation, I wouldn't be able to increase my fighting power quickly.

" In this case, I have only two levers left to quickly improve." Jake concluded aloud. "The first is to use these Runes to forge and improve my Aether Artifacts. By significantly upgrading my equipment, I can instantly become much stronger. The second lever is to use my increased understanding of Runes to develop my Aetherist skills. This is something I've always wanted to do, but even with my growing cognitive abilities, the results have been slow to come. I didn't expect to achieve any tangible results until several years later, but that all changed with this Soul Class.

"If I increase my Spirit Body level, my Intelligence and Perception will increase, further accelerating the speed at which I master and understand new Aether Runes and Symbols. It's like killing two birds with one stone."

[So, you're going the mage road.] Xi remarked with no surprise this time.

"No, I am still a warrior." I'm still a warrior. Jake retorted sharply. "What good is it to me to know all these Words of Power and Aether Spells if I run out of mental power and Aether? Only if I can survive any attack at any time will I consider myself to have achieved my goal. For this I need a strong, indestructible and tireless body."

[But you said just before that your body would not be the focus of your training this time?]

"And that's the truth. I will use these Runes to become permanently stronger."

Xi remained silent for a moment, but with their minds linked she gradually understood what he intended to do.

p???? ?????? [It won't be easy, but if you succeed, your power will put you on par with the most powerful natives of Quanoth.] She eventually agreed in a low tone. [Just one last warning. No matter how brilliant and daunting your plan may be, it's still Quanoth. If you can think of something like that, other players will find their own shortcut to power as well.]

"I know. But doing nothing would be even worse." Jake shrugged matter-of-factly. "Who knows? If my intelligence increases enough, maybe an epiphany will dawn on me and other options will open up."

Jake then went above the magma chamber, to the room he had prepared, then casting an apprehensive glance at the lava lake below him, he muttered with a dismal face,

"It's time for the first step." Turning to Jeanie, who was still engrossed in an exciting discussion with her new artificial friend, he asked her to stay here and not to come near him.pa??a ??????

Closing his eyes, his body suddenly collapsed on the ground like a disjointed puppet. His Spirit Body did not accompany his body in its fall, remaining stoically upright in the same posture. His unresponsive body showed no change except that his breathing had stopped, yet his exposed spirit body was immediately tugged by an unpleasant burning sensation.

His body was safe due to the high temperature of the cellar and its high constitution. It would probably take several months or years before his body began to decompose. But if he didn't return to his body, it would remain in the same place, utterly useless and unable to train or accomplish anything.

Jake could not accept this. To get stronger and train his Aetherist skills, he obviously needed his body.

'Here we go.' Jake sighed as he felt his spirit heat up achingly at such a mild temperature. Fortunately, his Myrtharian Soul gave him some tolerance to heat and radiation, making his mind less vulnerable than average to these kinds of energies. He had undergone such training in the past for a short time, and he knew what he was dealing with.

'This is not enough.' His Spirit Body gritted its teeth and hovering down to his passed out body he pulled out Xion's Soul Stone which he had previously taken out of his Space Storage. In this state, he had

limited energy and physical strength amounting to only 1 or 2% of his true strength, but it was more than enough to handle small objects.

The only difficulty was that he had to focus intensely to condense his spirit and affect the material world. Otherwise, he was no different than a cloud of smoke, unable to grasp anything.

With the Soul Stone in hand, he then connected his mind to his Space Storage and as against the Alpha Were-Eagle, he stretched his mental sense to the max to set the Aether Sun Core as high as possible.

The temperature and radiation of the cave soared and an overwhelming pain assailed every part of his Spirit Body, as if his very soul had been set on fire. Jeanie had not lied when she said she was safe as a Nature Spirit and she continued to converse with her Oracle AI without noticing.

Struggling to ignore the pain, Jake flew laboriously toward his Aether Sun Core, like Icarus flying toward the sun, and his Spirit Body began to melt dangerously, the pain so bad he almost wanted to die to make it stop.

[Stay with me Jake, I know you can do it] Xi encouraged him non-stop, resuming her role as a coach.

Jake forcibly suppressed his pain in an unbelievable exertion of willpower, then split a strand of mental power and began to draw voraciously on the abundant energy stored within his Soul Stone. His Spirit Body, which had been shrinking at an alarming rate, immediately stabilized and even rebounded.

Ruthless with himself, Jake used this renewed vigor to fly higher, until even the Soul Stone could not stop him from burning up. Then he came down a little, until he found the previous equilibrium point.

The rest was only torment, despair and excruciating suffering. With his soul literally on fire, swept by dreadful radiations and scorching heat, it was impossible to express any coherent thought. The seconds turned into hours and the minutes into days, making the ordeal seem even more interminable.

To keep him going, Xi never stopped talking to him, and always had a joke or story to tell to keep his mind occupied. She needed to speak a lot at first, but after a few days it became less and less necessary.

Four days later, Jake flew closer to his Aether Sun Core on his own initiative, until the mental torture began again. Xi kept his mind busy again, babbling about everything and anything, but she soon realized that she didn't need to talk to him as much. He had already acclimated to this level of pain.

Three weeks later, Jake had moved several meters closer to his Aether Sun Core, but for the first time Xi didn't need to distract him. His Spirit Body had become several times denser, and although he was still in pain, he was now able to ignore the pain and think normally.

And being able to think meant that he could now move on to step two of his training plan: Rune study.

Chapter 722: Becoming Stronger

Being able to think through pain changed everything. His Myrtharian Spirit was already inherently capable of multitasking.

As soon as he was able to concentrate again, he split his attention into several parts. One of them began to study his Novice Aether Manual, the second continued to draw energy from the Soul Stone to sustain

his strained Spirit Body, while the last one began to study in earnest the enormous mass of data contained within the Soul Stone itself.

Simply assimilating the Stone's Soul Energy was enough to grant him some of Xion Zolvhur's innate mental abilities and knowledge, but he was still limited by his lack of proficiency in the Aether language.

Jake had long ago developed a photographic memory and had easily memorized the elementary Aether Runes contained in his manual. The problem was performing them instantly. An architect might know how to draft a house, but he couldn't draw the blueprints with a snap of his finger.

ρ???? ?????? Each Aether Rune was thousands of times more complex. When their structure was simple, such as the Point used to create Aether Cores, then they often required prodigious mental strength to exert the required pressure. No matter what Aether Spell an Aetherist was trying to formulate, such an Aether-saturated Point was always needed to trigger physical phenomena.

Other, more sophisticated Aether Runes were often a mixture of Aether Points and complex patterns forcing the Aether to flow in a certain way. By forcing it to take certain routes and form certain patterns, these Aether streams would eventually converge, creating new, highly compressed Aether Points that did not require the spellcaster's mental assistance.

Following this logic, an infinite number of effects could be generated and it was this underlying principle that governed the operation of all Aether Spells, including Soul Spells. Soul Glyphs and Soul Classes did the same thing, but by weaving these Runes directly into the Spirit Body and Soul of their host.

To fulfill the requirement set by his master Cekt Mogusar and finally become a true Aetherist apprentice, Jake had to be able to instantly perform an Aether Spell. In more professional terms, this meant being able to produce an Aether Symbol on demand, which itself was formed from a number of Aether Runes. At least several thousand.

Thankfully, Jake wasn't starting completely from scratch. 90% of his novice manual was devoted to cataloguing the thousands of primordial Aether Spells that served as the basis for all the others and how to replicate them in reality. It was an invaluable bank of information that he would not part with for anything in the world.

The Light Aether Symbol he had used to create his Aether Sun Core was one of those easy Aether Spells, but at the time he had spent nearly a month refining that Symbol. Since it was a permanent Aether Spell, he had to learn to peel off a small piece of his Spirit Body in order to anchor the Symbol, while keeping it mentally connected to him.

Now, with his increased mental faculties, Jake was confident he could reproduce such a rune in a few dozen minutes, but it was still far from enough to create a proper Aether Spell instantly.

If Jake had to rely on his natural talent and enhanced mental stats to accomplish this feat, he probably would have had to reach the standard of a Sixth or Seventh Ordeal Player, but he would still have been limited to simple spells. In other words, still a far cry from a Rank 3 Aetherist like his master.

The Rune Engraver Soul Class was a game changer.

With the Rune Engraving skill, Jake could, in addition to his greatly facilitated comprehension, instinctively reproduce any Runes, of any language, that he had successfully created at least once. As

long as he produced them at least once, these Runes would forever be part of his arsenal, able to be produced on demand without having to make any conscious effort.

In addition to this first asset, thanks to the Deciphering/Coding skill, Jake now also had a prodigious talent for understanding, interpreting and deciphering any language and of course using it as he pleased. In other words, where a typical Evolver would have to run numerous tests to develop a new Aether Spell, Jake would be able to improvise them seamlessly once he understood all the underlying mechanisms.

And there was no better way to accomplish this than to start with the basics!

Jake had specific goals for this training and he was determined to achieve them.

First of all, perform all the basic Aether Runes.

Contrary to what one might think, he didn't simply try to imitate an Aether Rune from his manual. Even a basic Aether Rune had a certain degree of complexity to it, except for the simplest ones. But what about once you break it down into much simpler substeps?

In the end, all that was left were lines, dots and curves. That's exactly what Jake started to draw. A straight line, a round, an oval, a triangle, a square, and then all sorts of simple patterns that were common in all Runes. From 2D, he moved to 3D to form a sphere, a cube and so on.

It was more difficult than one might think at first. Making a perfectly straight Aether line, or a perfect circle, these were simple geometric concepts, but they required impeccable precision. When Jake had created the Light Aether Spell for his Aether Sun Core, it didn't look anything like the one shown in his manual.

This was a problem that could have been solved as his Agility, Intelligence and Perception grew, but his Soul Class solved it for good. He took his time in making these basic figures, reproducing as many variations of these strokes and curves as he could, playing with the angles and curves.

After a while,

"This is my limit. I can't make them any smaller." Jake exhaled with slight disappointment.

[Your accuracy is close to the micron.] Xi congratulated him, struggling to contain her admiration. [A little more and you would have reached the standard of a Grade 1 Bloodline. To cast your Aether Spells is more than enough, and the smaller size of the Runes will allow you to perform them in no time at a lower cost.]

"In the end, I'm still restricted by my stats and mental strength." Jake quipped cheerlessly. "But you're right about one thing. To cast spells and accomplish my goals is more than enough. Let's continue."

Jake then moved on to the next phase: Combinations. Using his manual as a guide, he began to connect simple patterns together, like a musician would connect notes to form chords.

Six weeks later, he found no more "chords" to create and moved on to "melodies". He had finally reached the stage where he could begin to tackle the Aether Runes. With a specific goal in mind, he chose the first Rune of a specific Aether Symbol, which was far from being the easiest, and got to work.

Ironically, drawing his first Aether Rune was ridiculously easy. After doing all that work up front, he just had to put the chords together to form the requested melody. With the first Rune completed, he immediately moved on to the second, and then the third.

A few hours later, a micron-sized Aether Symbol blazed brightly before him. Jake released his grip and it scattered, returning to the Aether. He focused again and in a split second, the Aether Symbol reformed once more.

"I did it." Jake rejoiced with elation. If he had not been a mere spirit, he probably would have jumped for joy.

This Aether Symbol wasn't just any Aether Symbol. It allowed him to perform the Aether Spell: Spirit Link. By inscribing two identical Aether Symbols, one in the Caster's Spirit Body, the other in a piece of Spirit Body previously severed from the main body, the Caster's consciousness could continue to move from one part to the other, as if the two pieces of Spirit Body had never been separated.

It was a connection transcending time and space. A process extremely similar to what the Oracle System used to communicate instantly across the Mirror Universe.

This Aether Spell opened the door to a myriad of other applications and spells that were far more complex and miraculous. The first category of applications allowed for the creation and remote control of Clones, Machines and weapons. The second category was communication, intelligence and exploration spells. Lastly, the third category was directly combat oriented: Teleportation and remote spell activation.

However, that wasn't what Jake was interested in right now. The reason he had done all this was to become able to train his body and mind simultaneously. Without wasting any time, he produced two identical Aether Symbols, tore off a piece of his Spirit Body without flinching despite the excruciating pain, then placed the second Symbol into the Aether Soul Core placed under the glabella of his physical body.

As if by magic, the connection with his original body was re-established, and when the Spirit Body's piece occupied the space of his body, he regained the familiar sensations he had missed so much over the past two months.

With his multitasking ability, controlling his body and mind at the same time was a breeze. Jake's body, which had been asleep for two months, suddenly began to move.

In one leap, he flew as close as he could to his Aether Sun Core, easily surpassing the height record previously set by his Spirit Body. The Body Tempering could resume.

At the same time, Jake began to study the next Aether Symbols, but this time he applied them directly to his physical body.

Soon, a new Core, very different from his Aether Core and Aether Soul Core, began to take shape.

Chapter 723: Reiga Core

This new Core followed on from a long string of realizations. Jake once believed that one Aether Core would suffice, and in theory it did. Only he came to realize that Aether was not a very readily available energy.

After more than a year of cultivating his Aether Core, it now contained enough Aether to blow up a small city, but this nearly limitless energy could not be mobilized as easily as in the early days.

Just like a black hole that swallowed more and more matter without spitting it out, his Aether Core continued to grow in density, accumulating more and more Aether, but it was trapped inside. The only Aether really available was the Aether contained in the Aether Core's accretion disk, which grew along with the Aether Core itself and reflected its pull on the surrounding Aether.

By influencing it with his mental force, Jake could cause the Aether Core to spin faster on itself, allowing it to more effectively suck up the Aether around it. Alas, even doing this, the amount of Aether available was barely enough to produce Aether Spells worth the power of a small C4 charge.

When his Aether Core was less developed, Jake could also, as a last resort, force his Aether Core to spin in the opposite direction, forcing it to regurgitate the Aether previously gobbled up. This would sabotage months of sweat and effort, but it would effectively give him a momentary power boost that would enhance all of his spells and give him unlimited stamina.

Sadly, Jake had not been able to use this method for several months now. When his Aether Core had exceeded a certain "weight", he found that his mental strength was no longer sufficient to force it to regurgitate the absorbed Aether. It was like trying to force a black hole to vomit out the matter in it and it was virtually impossible.

Even with his new Soul Class and a significant boost to his psychic abilities, it was so difficult that stopping the spinning of his Aether Core and then reversing it would probably take him many hours and he wasn't sure he could do it. In combat, his enemies would never give him that chance.

What he could do was let his Aether Core explode, although that again would require a lot of power. Yet destroying had always been easier than creating.

This solution could allow him to take his enemies with him in death, but for obvious reasons it was a last ditch option that Jake hoped he would never have to resort to.

To get back to the design of this new Core, it was essential to understand what had driven Jake to take this new path, but the reasons cited above had only weighed half in the balance leading him to this final decision.

The truth of the matter was that Aether was not meant to be used for casting spells. On paper, it was the primary source from which energy and matter were derived, but it also had a special function without which nothing in the Mirror Universe could exist.

Indeed, anything that saw its Aether Density drop to zero would instantly cease to exist. This was true for living beings, inorganic matter, but also energy in all its forms. Even an electron, a photon or any other elementary particle had its own Aether Density, without which it could not exist.

When Jake used his Aether to cast one of his Bloodline abilities or spells, he had to first convert it into energy or matter, but also assign a certain amount of Aether to define their level of existence. The thing was that all this was automated until now by his Bloodline and Soul Glyphs.

But that was about to change.

Jake had been exposed since his Third Ordeal to a much more efficient source of fuel for his magic: Fluid. In addition to providing a great deal of immediately available energy, it had the added benefit of nourishing the body, sharpening the mind and senses of the Fluid Masters, as well as providing an array of instinctively usable abilities. The stronger the Fluid affinity, the more the Fluid Wielders could call upon mysterious and unfathomable abilities, which in the case of the Grand Masters were almost akin to divine abilities.

The downside was that the Fluid was close to the Aether in many ways, but not nearly as versatile. By choosing the Fluid, they were closing themselves off from the Aether, which is why Sigmar, though a revered Fluid Grand Master, had chosen to give it up and restart his training with the Aether.

More recently, Jake had obtained a brand new slave: Shaktilar Zakal, a Shyril using relatively powerful ice magic. When he first read his Oracle Status, he found that he had a lvl 6 Ice Mana Core inside him, but an Aether Core worth only 112 points.

At the time, he wasn't that fascinated by it.

Two years earlier, however, and more precisely on the first day of his Fourth Ordeal, Jake had found this same characteristic in a certain Minmin: Jeanie Rumplesky. The little fairy had a lvl 10 Water Mana Core, but no Aether Core.

Despite her ridiculous stats except for her Intelligence, Jeanie had proven during the battle of Lodunvals that she could use powerful support spells and create ice and water shields strong enough to protect her comrades from Wengol assaults. Not being a water mage, she lacked experience and technique, but at no time did she show any signs of exhaustion or mental fatigue.

At that moment, Jake knew he was doing it wrong. With the battle over, he and Xi began to research the various alternative energy systems that existed in conjunction with the Aether. It was a good thing that his novice manual also covered this subject.pa??a ??????

It had been a long process, but he had finally found a type of energy that suited him perfectly: Reiga.

This energy source was not natural and had been invented by a certain legendary warrior from the System A4 trillions of years earlier. In essence, it behaved like light, but could be manipulated to follow a certain trajectory. It also had a zero joule effect, meaning that the energy wasted in the environment was nil and therefore unintentional heating was impossible.

Like Mana, Reiga was a neutral energy that could be used to support any magic, but unlike Fluid, it was a genuine pure energy in the same way as thermal or nuclear energy and therefore had its own Aether density.

Because of its light-like behavior, it was an energy known for its instantaneousness and long range. Handling it could be difficult, but for Jake whose Bloodline specialized in radiation it was the ideal source of power.

The property that made Reiga so interesting compared to Mana or Fluid, was that being unnatural, it had to be customized step by step, making Reiga a customizable energy unique to each user. Nonetheless, what all these types of Reiga had in common was that they could use other types of energy to restore and expand their own.

A Reiga Core could be refined and redesigned to convert other types of energy, as Enya had done with the help of Hakkrasha to use Aether to feed her Fire Core.

Finally, the last major selling point for the Reiga was that there was no limit to the number of Reiga Cores and their attributes that an individual could create. Depending on their characteristics, internal conflicts could emerge, but nothing that an expert could not resolve.

Jake had one major problem, though: He didn't have the instructions for creating this Reiga Core, only a detailed description of what could be achieved from such an energy source.

If he had to rely on his own skill and perseverance to create one, who knows how many years it would have taken him to succeed. But with his Rune Engraver Soul Class, it was now a dream within his reach.

With his mind in an extremely profound meditative trance, Jake continued to master one Aether Symbol after another. Each new Aether Symbol he mastered forever added to his arsenal, and like a baby learning to speak, babbling the first words was always the hardest.

What should have been abstruse and obscure to any other novice Aetherist soon became amazingly clear to Jake because of his Deciphering/Coding ability to instinctively understand new languages.

The first few stuttered words became sentences, then text, and only a few days later, Jake realized he was already able to "speak. At that moment, he was overwhelmed by the realization that creating a Reiga Core was not difficult at all. Perhaps he could do even better.

With this new language, Jake first created the basics: an extremely complex Aether Symbol capable of harnessing Aether, radiation, heat, life and spirit energy, as well as the ambient Mana of Quanoth, and converting it into Reiga. Even with his Rune Engraver skill, this took time.

ρ???? ?????? For added adaptability, Jake made this Aether Symbol work both ways. If he ever needed to recharge his mental or physical batteries, he would have his Reiga available to do so.

Then imitating the structure of Mana, he set about to parameterize this new Reiga to give it properties similar to light and without the Joule effect as the Oracle System archives described, but with the possibility of being used in the same way as Aether to generate spells.

Because of its electromagnetic-like behavior and the fact that this Reiga had some mass, Jake knew that learning to master this energy would prove difficult, but it was the path he chose.

A month later, the convoluted Aether Symbol that governed all the parameters of his new Reiga Core was born. At that moment, the cave he was in was suddenly plunged into darkness. The lava of the magma chamber dimmed and the temperature suddenly dropped by several hundred degrees.

All the energy in the room, be it Aether, Mana, heat or light, suddenly converged on the Aether Symbol positioned a few centimeters above his Aether Core and as it was absorbed inside, a ray of exceedingly pure light shot out from the other side.

The Reiga Core was born.

Chapter 724: Terrifying Mutant

As with the formation of his Aether Core, as soon as Reiga's first beam was produced Jake used all his willpower and radiation control to force the beam to bend. Its wave-like behavior made the process exceptionally difficult, but Jake had been preparing for this eventuality from the start.

Jake had achieved enough control over the ambient light to make himself literally invisible even before the Fourth Ordeal began. By contrast, forcing the light to follow a certain path was no big deal.

This constant beam of Reiga curved again and again, until it formed a ring that circumscribed the Aether Symbol within. Within seconds, this ring quickly grew in brightness, but because its light was trapped and the diameter of this ring so small, all a curious onlooker dissecting its insides would have found was a tiny black hole.

According to the laws of physics, light was supposed to travel in a straight line, and only a powerful gravitational force could normally distort space-time and make light appear to follow a curved path. His Bloodline ability "Radiation Control" allowed him to ignore this physics constraint.

Therefore, since light has no mass, forcing it to behave in a certain way was virtually effortless for him. The only real hurdle was to manage its celerity. The Reiga's speed of movement far exceeded his reaction time, so he had to plan in advance every move he planned to do with it.

But as light and user-friendly as the Reiga was, light couldn't actually bend on its own. If he relaxed his attention for even a moment, the Reiga ring would disperse in a blinding flash of light. So this was not a viable long-term solution unless he never slept again.

Jake immediately realized that something was missing. With the experience of this first attempt, he let the Reiga ring dissipate, then went back to modifying the elaborate Aether Symbol he had created. A few hours later, he was able to give the Reiga increased maneuverability.

Its movement speed and behavior was still that of light, but each Reiga particle now had several instructions in its Aether Code that made it much more obedient. The Reiga could now follow its own trajectories and even stop moving if Jake wanted it to.

This time, Jake had really succeeded. No need to make a ring or any other bold geometric patterns. The Aether Symbol produced another Reiga beam, but it did not leave the center of the Aether Symbol that birthed it.

A black dot simply sprouted in the middle of it and the Reiga produced kept stopping at the same spot, making the new Reiga Core denser and denser, though infinitesimally small.

"Success!"

Jake then moved on to the final and most crucial step in the creation of his Reiga Core: Making the produced Reiga improve the overall performance of the Aether Symbol producing the Reiga. And to do this, Jake figured that the only way to accomplish this feat was to produce an identical Reiga Symbol.

That way, the circle would be complete.

For the next two days, Jake spent his time making this Reiga Symbol. Copying the Aether Symbol and adapting it to the Reiga had taken him only a few minutes thanks to his status as a Rune Engraver, but getting the Reiga to follow the designated path took some practice.

But he had managed. When the Reiga Symbol was finally perfected, Jake scattered the first Aether Symbol used to make the initial Reiga and watched with pride as his new Reiga Core quickly strengthened on its own.

The final structure consisted of a Reiga Symbol and a Reiga Core. Jake could freely choose whether the Reiga produced would be used to enhance the Reiga Symbol or the Reiga Core, but whatever amount of Reiga was in his Reiga Core he would be able to tap into with a single thought.

Needless to say, Jake chose to channel all of his Reiga into the Reiga Symbol first, leaving only 1% of the Reiga produced to feed the Reiga Core. For now, the Reiga produced every second was negligible.

‘The Reiga is produced too slowly.’ Jake grimaced, before putting it into perspective by telling himself that he couldn’t have done it any other way. ‘I can’t finalize my plan. With so little Reiga it’s impossible to power the Words of Power I was planning.’

That’s right. What Jake wanted to accomplish was to use his Reiga, a versatile energy that could replace both vital and psychic energy to carve permanent Words of Power into his flesh. If he succeeded, his combat power would increase exponentially in an instant.

[To produce more Reiga you should have created a larger Aether Symbol or one with more Aether]. Xi kindly consoled him. [I think what you did was the best option. You just have to be patient now and hope that your enemies will give you time to mature.]

Jake suddenly lifted his head, his Myrtharian Eyes peering through the ceiling of the cavern and beyond, to focus on the commotion on the surface several kilometers above him.

With his sharp eyesight, he detected three people, the first one being chased by the other two. The first one seemed to be in dire straits, but strangely it did not try to flee. Stupidly and completely illogically, it kept dodging enemy attacks while scouring the area.

Several times he saw it digging for something in the ground, seemingly looking in his direction, and suddenly it struck a chord in his mind. One Oracle Scan later, he frowned,

“Carmine? What is she doing here? Is she looking for me?” Jake muttered cheerlessly. Their last exchange hadn’t left a good impression on him.

Seeing her again wasn’t exactly high on his list of priorities, but three months had passed since then. His negativity and guilt had long since been swept away in the suffering flames of his training.

Above him, Carmin nimbly dodged yet another attack, but the third pursuer took the opportunity to shift at superhuman speed behind her. With perfect timing, he deflected the young woman’s Blood Whip with one hand, then with the other impaled her from behind. A gaunt hand with long black fingernails sprang from her rib cage between her breasts, staining her day dress with a vermilion liquid.

[Are you really going to let her die, Jake? They look like Vampires, but one of them seems to be a Player.] Xi questioned him reprovingly. [They’re pretty strong.]

“Tsk! Fine, I’ll save her.” Jake obeyed in a bad mood.

This would be a chance for him to test the results of his training. His Spirit Body merged back with his body and the Aether Sun Core was retrieved into his Space Storage. As he was recalling it, Jake figured he could now easily create a new one. He would no longer need Cekt’s help to make one.

From now on, he was officially an Aetherist apprentice and by virtue of his Engraver Soul Class Rune, a very dangerous one.

“Jeanie, we’re leaving.” He said with a bored expression as he prepared to leap.

” Yippee!” A streak of electric blue light shot at him from a corner of the cave and disappeared into his pocket.

Jake didn’t know how she’d been keeping herself busy for the past three months, but the little fairy seemed different from before. In addition to being a little taller, she weighed almost twice as much, and for the first time he felt like he was carrying a radiator.

He bent his legs and with a leap his body shot towards the ceiling of the cave like a comet, waves forming on the surface of the rock as he stepped inside. Within four seconds, he crossed the distance between his magma chamber and the surface without making a sound or a ripple to indicate his approach.

As soon as his head emerged from the ground, hidden by the tall grass, the ground liquefied beneath Carmin’s two assailants, who tripped and sank into it as if they had just fallen into a pool. Before they could adjust their footing, the ground solidified again and they found themselves trapped in a lump of hardened earth.

The Vampire who had injured Carmin reacted swiftly, immediately flexing his muscles and struggling with all his might to break through his rock prison. The rock immediately began to crack, while the startled Player didn’t hesitate for a second and activated the Oracle Skill Teleportation to flee the scene.

“What decisiveness.” Jake praised sincerely. If the Player had stayed a fraction of a second longer, he would have been trapped here permanently.

As the rock prison was about to shatter, Jake leisurely pointed a finger at the Vampire and a tiny Aether Symbol flashed fleetingly before him.

‘Hardening.’

The rock prison that looked like it was about to shatter immediately became several times more solid. And that was only by relying on his Aether Core and stamina. He had not tapped into his Reiga at all.

Even with this strengthening spell, the Vampire did not give up on escaping and his body began to cover itself in a crimson halo. If one looked closely, it was possible to see micro drops of blood oozing out of the pores of his skin, then flaring up to form that reddish aura.

“Watch out Jake, he’s using his Blood Essence to boost his abilities!” Carmin shouted to warn him.

Still with the same expression, Jake ignored the Vampire’s warning and continued to point his finger at his prisoner, but this time right at him.

Fear.

Anemia.

Fatigue.

Suffocation.

Paralysis.

Freeze.

The eyes of the Vampire trapped in the rock bulged in astonishment as the combination of Aether Spells struck him one after another. Separately, their power was nothing special, but executed together they produced such incomprehensible synergistic effects that the poor victim was completely befuddled.

The tremendous strength that the Vampire's muscles exerted vanished at once, while he began to shiver with terror in his rock prison, his face sallow and his eyes rolling back.

Right now, he didn't want to get out of his rock prison, but to stay hidden in it forever to escape this terrifying Mutant that came out of nowhere.

Chapter 725 Backfiring Plan

With the enemy subdued, Jake walked leisurely over to him, stopping when his face was only inches from his own. The desperate Vampire immediately retaliated with an attempt to bite him in the throat, but Jake fended off the attack by lazily tilting his head back.

The captive Vampire's jaw snapped shut with a painful chattering sound, but the worst was yet to come. When he tried to retreat by pulling his head back, Jake's hand suddenly gripped his throat and with a flick of the wrist dislocated his mandible.

The lower half of his jaw now hanging limply in the void, Jake observed his victim with a tinge of condescension, which looked more like a taunt. As if he was inviting the Vampire to try his luck again, but making it clear that the consequences of his next offense if he failed would be more severe.

"Juu kii eee." The humiliated Vampire babbled unintelligibly because of his dislocated jaw.

"I'd rather know the reason for this little chase and the name of your accomplice." Jake chuckled as he carved gently onto his prisoner's forehead the words, "I am sincere and unable to keep a secret."

The Vampire immediately felt the difference on his psychological state. It was completely different from the combo of lesser Aether Spells that Jake had spammed in his face. This time he could feel that it was a direct confrontation between their wills, but these words of power seemed to be primarily draining his own spiritual energy rather than that of the Mutant in front of him.

"Wha the fuu ii tha?!" He began to panic as he began to thrash around in his prison again.

"Tut, tut, tut, you don't have to know. Just relax and tell me what's on your mind." Jake shushed him with his finger.

Carmin watched the scene of capture and the bizarre interrogation with a dumbfounded expression. Seconds earlier, she was in dire straits, hounded by this arrogant Vampire and an unknown Player. Now, that same arrogant Vampire was at Jake's mercy, spilling everything he knew about his clan's grand design, as well as every juicy detail and rumor he knew.

Not a complete moron, the Vampire realized that the gashes on his forehead had to do with his loquacity and tried to focus his Blood Energy on them to speed up his regeneration, but with mild success.

Each time the Words of Power were about to fade, Jake would simply run his claw back over the gashes, deepening the incisions each time. By the time the Vampire finished confessing everything he knew, the cuts were so deep that they had left several indelible grooves on his skull.

After hearing his confessions, any hint of mercy Jake might have felt towards his captive vanished for good. With a backhanded swipe, he sent the Vampire's head rolling to the ground.

Unforgivable! The crimes and machinations that this Vampire and those of his clan had committed were so numerous and despicable that even Jake, who thought he'd seen it all in terms of depravity since the Bhuzkoc episode, couldn't help but execute him on the spot.

"I know why you're here, Carmin." Jake said, turning his head to the stunned young woman.

Now that the battle was over, he noticed that her suggestive dress was in tatters and his gaze could not help but slide towards her plunging neckline and her bare thighs. Of course, Carmin noticed his reaction, but instead of covering herself prudishly, she willingly leaned forward to give him a better view.

Paradoxically, this is what brought Jake out of his admiring daze. Although the young woman was indeed ravishing and to his taste, he had not forgotten how their last meeting had ended.

Seeing that he was not in the mood for jokes, Carmin stopped teasing him and covered herself by changing her dress in front of him without showing the slightest embarrassment.

"I don't understand why you dress like that instead of wearing armor..." Jake commented in a low voice without hiding anything of his perplexity.

If she never got hurt he would understand, but whether it was this Ordeal or the previous one she had often found herself in a bad position because of her inadequate gear.

"Because I basically use my Charm to get my way." She replied with a bewitching smile as she winked at him.

"That doesn't seem to work very often." Jake scoffed callously. She was pretty and charming, but not so pretty that he couldn't control himself.

"I've never used my Charm on you." She answered honestly with more of a straight face than he expected from her. *pa da*

"Not even when you tried to drink my blood during the Third Ordeal?"

"Maybe once?" She rolled her eyes ambiguously. "But I haven't tried it since. More frankly, Quanoth is not the right place for me. Since the natives are only as strong as their spirit bodies, the ones I can't

defeat are also the ones my charm is ineffective on. Not to mention the fact that Vampires and Demons abound in this city with mind control abilities that don't pale in comparison to mine."

"You don't need to justify yourself. Just tell me why you're here and let's get it over with." Jake gave her a curt rebuke.

"Wyatt and Aisling. I suspect they were captured." She dropped the bombshell. From her red eyes and downcast expression, he could tell it hadn't been easy for her to come to him for help after their last exchange.

As expected. Jake sighed inwardly. The Vampire's interrogation had told him enough to come to this conclusion.

"We'll discuss the rest on the way."

Carmin's account of the last three months corroborated the version of the Vampire he had just interrogated. When he had gone into exile on his own for training, Laudarkvik had enjoyed a brief lull that had unfortunately not lasted.

As Aisling and Haynt had suspected, the other Factions had predictably made no move against them upon their return, leaving them to go about their business as usual and interacting with them as if nothing had happened. Provided that they did not take any further risks and stayed within the city walls, they were no longer in immediate danger.

With Ruby also gone, Carmin was left as the only Player among the Mutants and with Aisling's similar age and decent strength, they immediately hit it off. Over the past three months, she had quickly made herself indispensable to the other Mutants, earning their respect.

By comparison, Jake, who had been made Vice-Leader by Aisling with Haynt's endorsement, had never shown his face ever since. If not for his heroic feat of saving Aisling's life during the battle of Lodunvals, the other Mutants would have long since challenged his meteoric rise.

Unfortunately, things were never simple. Two days after Jake and Ruby disappeared, the imperial knight-griffin detachment mobilized by the Emperor of Ret'Asi had finally arrived in Laudarkvik, led by none other than the commander-in-chief of the imperial garrison.

The other Factions initially planned to blame Aisling and Haynt for their failure to rescue the refugees from Lodunvals. At that point, the other factions, especially the Undeads, would have put themselves forward by showing that they had retaken the city and even repelled the invading Khinchod by exterminating the vast majority of its army.

Even if Aisling and Haynt objected to their methods, or accused them of plotting against them with supporting evidence, it would not have changed the outcome. For the emperor didn't care about their internal squabbles as long as his orders were carried out properly. In fact, he even encouraged this kind of conflict. The more Laudarkvik was divided, the less time they had to foment a revolt.

Yet, there was one small incident that all those plotters in Laudarkvik had not foreseen: the death of Sir Gole. This useless and incompetent man was none other than the very son of the Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Guard, the High Duke Gole.

Sir Gole was the decadent aristocrat, who had been engaged in fornication and debauchery in his carriage until the last moments of his life. When the Wengols had caught up with the Lodunvalsee refugee convoy, he was making out with his concubines. When the demons stirred up a riot and the dead humans and Wengols were turned into Undeads, he continued to ignore the threat to his life. When the Vampires of the Thrajah Clan showed up, he feverishly indulged in his wild ways.

At last, when he had died in general indifference, struck down by the barbarian Player named Azeus accompanying the lich Vhoskaud, nobody had noticed anything.

In addition to overseeing the reconquest of Lodunvals and the counterattack against Khinchod, the commander-in-chief of the Imperial Guard had volunteered for this very mission to rescue his son. Upon his arrival, instead of inquiring about the fate of Lodunvals, he immediately sought to know the fate of his son.

High Duke Gole was the emperor's right hand, and the emperor trusted him completely. The imperial knight garrison accompanying him numbered only 500 warriors, but each of them was above level 70. They represented the quintessential military power of the Empire, the elite of the elite, selected from billions of soldiers.

At that moment, their evil plan had backfired. The face of the powerful Wight co-leading the Undeads had become even more corpse-like, while the Lich occupying the second seat had quickly found an excuse to escape.

Carmin, Elduin, Bhammod, Jake, Ruby and the refugees among the witnesses had been called to testify and this time their testimony had not been taken lightly.

Upon learning the truth, Duke Gole was immediately enraged.

Chapter 726: The Past Three Months

The Duke's wrath brought dire consequences to the culprits' agenda. What should have been a formality and earned them a rich reward, or at least a reprieve, had turned into a disaster.

After diligently investigating and listening to the testimonies of every survivor except for the absent Jake and Ruby, Duke Gole had gained a clear idea of the course of events and his ire was immediately vented on the Factions he believed to be guilty, whether they were directly or indirectly involved.

Without hesitation, the leader of the Thorough demon clan was sentenced to death along with the leader of the Thrajah vampire clan, the leader of the Avians and the chief Lich of the Undeads. Abbikesh may have been part of the conspiracy, but the fact that he and his men did not intervene until after his son's death saved them from the gallows.

The Avians' leader, Lansho, was the Alpha Golden Were-Eagle slain by Jake. Qewie, the young woman with the appearance of a juvenile White Were-Hawk, had, before Sir Gole's death was revealed, hatefully accused Jake and Ruby of killing her uncles. Having also intervened after the time of his son's supposed death, Duke Gole had also decided to temporarily spare them.

But only temporarily. The young Qewie, who had become their new leader, was fully aware of this. As for Abbikesh, the very reason for his exile in Laudarkvik was the boundless hatred the emperor held for

having cuckolded him along with his favorite concubine. If Duke Gole decided to kill him, the Ret'Asi Emperor would probably reward him handsomely.

The leader of the Liches having decisively fled by an obscure method, the targets in his immediate collimator were thus only the clan of Thrajah vampires, and Thozuch demons.

But how could the designated culprits accept such a judgment? Ironically, even the Undeads of Laudarkvik treasured their lives. The direct consequence of these death sentences was chaos. Utter chaos in the most brutal and unadulterated form.

The majestic palace where the High Council of Laudarkvik was held had immediately turned into a bloodbath. The 500 imperial knights had risen up against Astraroth Thozuch and Seskel Thrajah, the leaders of their respective factions. The carnage was unstoppable.

On the surface, Duke Gole and his 500 knights of level 70 and above boasted an immense numerical superiority over their opponents, but in front of them stood a Demon and a Vampire over level 90 and almost as old as Quanoth itself. These two cruel and vicious beings had no intention of surrendering.

The rest of the story was self-explanatory. The spiral of hidden alliances was set in motion, revealing some surprises for those present at the High Council.

Syn and Melion, occupying the two Metamorph Council seats, had promptly flown to Astraroth's aid, although their official allies since the founding of Laudarkvik had always been the Were-beings.

Xaverie Zangruth, one of the three seats belonging to the demons and mother of Aisling, had burst out laughing and left the council whistling instead of helping her fellow Astraroth in trouble. The third seat Aggenur Dorgrarauth had acted even more strangely, ambushing the Duke Gole straight away. However, it was not to protect Astraroth, a demon like himself, but rather to assist Seskel, a Vampire.

Usadra and Fodnyr, the two Dark Races seats, had also thrown themselves into the fray, attempting directly to assassinate not Sire Gole, but Astraroth alongside Remus Dracul, one of the three Vampire seats and also Aisling's great-grandfather.

For the rest, the alliance games had gone as planned. The Were-Beings had mercilessly attacked Seskel, although Qewie and her bodyguard had chosen to steer clear of this reckoning.

The Nosferati Vampire clan had come to the defense of Sire Gole, once again reaffirming their loyalty to the Ret'Asi Empire, while Haynt and Aisling had also chosen to help Sire Gole. Finally, Xellmezon, the Wight leader occupying one of the two Undead seats had against all odds chosen to get the hell out of there, surely joining his missing Lich compere.

? ?? ??-?? ????. ??? This deadly battle, which had taken place almost three months earlier, had lasted a good afternoon and had resulted in the deaths of Fodnyr of the Dark Races, Sable of the Werewolves, and Cazimir Nosferati. Seskel Thrajah and Remus Dracul of the Vampires were also grievously injured and would require a major blood ceremony to recover.

On the side of the Imperial Griffin Knights, Duke Gole had managed to stay alive, but his entire force had been wiped out. Because of this incident, the plan to reconquer and retaliate against Khinchod had been put on the back burner, but not completely stopped.

Duke Gole did not return to Kanui after his failure, but simply dispatched a Nosferati messenger to the capital to request reinforcements. To ensure his safety, he had chosen to reside temporarily at Haynt's place, an Astral known for his moral rectitude. From his palace, he continued to oversee the reconquest of Lodunvals.? ???a ??????

After the clash of titans, normal life had resumed in Laudarkvik, but relations between the various factions and clans had been irreparably damaged. The concern was that the winner of this tragic battle was also apparent.

Two coalitions had openly revealed their existence in this gruesome showdown. The progressives, more inclined to support the Empire, and the separatist extremists, who saw themselves as a superior species to humans and refused to bow down to the Emperor.

The former camp included the Dark Races, the Dracul and Nosferati clans, the Mutants and Astral, as well as Prince Edric's sub-faction of Humans. The opposition officially included the demon clans Thozuch and Dorgarauth, the Vampires of the Thrajah clan, the Metamorphs, most of the Were-beings and most likely the unofficial support of Abbikesh and his men, the Undeads and the traitors of the Astral faction.

The pro-empires had lost two key leaders on this infamous day, namely Fodnyr and Cazimir Nosferati, while Remus Dracul was out of action. On the other hand, the demons had escaped unscathed, Seskel Thrajah had not perished either, the Undeads had fled in time, and Abbikesh was doing just fine. Their only known loss was Sable of the Were-wolves, but she and Lansho of the Were-Eagle were not worth a single hair of Astraroth and Seskel's head.

Beyond that, they also had to deal with Xaverie Zangruth who chose to play the neutrality card. Her demonic ancestry and her tumultuous relationship with her ex-husband Grimbald Dracul made her position unclear. Having betrayed the Dracul clan at the time and caused her ex-husband to be sentenced to the Eternal Rest, many were more inclined to think that she fully supported the other demons.

In addition to Xaverie, there was also another Were-Lion that both sides were wary of: Kenway. He was not one of the three Were-beings, but he was the older brother of the first seat Lysander, another Were-Lion, but also a valued friend of Haynt. Because of his reputation as a reclusive hermit, no one knew what he truly thought, but many felt that he would not abandon his brother and his clan if they were under threat of extinction.

Lastly, there was one more component to the equation: the Undead army created during the Lodunvals mass killings and the Players involved in this massive project. Whether it was Vhoskaud, Azeus, or Shamash, no one had any idea what had happened to them.

These turbulent currents in Laudarkvik had paradoxically restored a semblance of order and peace, but no one was fooled. It was only temporary. In the shadows, internal wars, assassinations and intrigues continued to take place one after the other.

In this context of insecurity and anarchy, the missions concerning the reconquest of Lodunvals had finally resumed and Carmin, Elduin, Bhammod, Wyatt and Seren had formed together a formidable team of adventurers.

In those three months, they had contributed greatly and the entire Lodunvals region had been recaptured. Carmin had gained Aisling's trust and moved up the ranks, while Wyatt had gained Remus Dracul's trust.

Or so he thought. For starters, the reinforcements Duke Gole requested from the empire never came. Within weeks of the council battle, news of numerous conflicts, invasions and other insurrections had reached their ears and it had become clear to everyone that the Empire no longer possessed the resources to deal with them.

Their independence was tacitly accepted as long as they did not directly harm the empire. With Lodunvals and its region officially retaken, the war against Khinchod ended shortly thereafter.

With the war over, Wyatt and the others returned to their respective faction headquarters and faced a different kind of internal war. Much more deceitful and sinister.

The Metamorphs were by far the most formidable in these tactics. Although their species were all different, Shapeshifters, Doppelgangers and certain evolutions of Mimics could take on the appearance of members of the enemy camp and even mimic their abilities and sometimes even copy their every memory, literally acting like the person they were impersonating.

Thanks to the already weakened position of the Mutants and the neutral position of Xaverie, Carmin had it easy, but Wyatt had instead risked his life dozens of times over the past two months, eliminating numerous Demon and Undead officers and avoiding dozens of assassination attempts by the Metamorphs.

The night before, he had been invited into Remus' office to discuss their next plan, and that was the last time Carmin had heard from him.

Chapter 727: Second Soul Class

"Where are you going?" Carmin halted her steps as she saw him heading in the wrong direction. "The Vampire district isn't that way."

"Who said I was going to save Wyatt right away?" Jake rolled his eyes, trying hard not to sound too scathing. "If someone like Wyatt got set up, I'd be a complete moron if I went into the lion's den headlong."

Carmin tensed under the remark of scorn from the man walking in front of her, but she knew in her heart that he was telling the truth. It was because of her restlessness that she had overreacted. In comparison, Seren, who had joined the Thrajah clan at Wyatt's request, was not worried at all. Knowing her character and the supremacist beliefs of the Thrajahs, it was a safe bet that the arrogant lolita was having her best time.

"In that case, where are we going? This isn't the Mutant district either." Carmin huffed vexedly.

"The Prophetic Stele." Jake replied merrily, pointing to the Cathedral of Laudarkvik in the distance.

It was located in the heart of the Outer City, opposite the great staircase leading to the Demon District. One could see in it the will of Aerae, or at least of its clergy, to keep the Demons' wickedness under

control. The religious building's proximity to the slums kept the gloomy thoughts of this poor and desperate population in check to some extent.

"Do you want to change your Soul Class? Or get a new one?" Carmin marveled. It hadn't been long since they'd arrived in Quanoth and it seemed a little early to be picking a new one.

The young Blood Human had chosen a common Soul Class, very common among Vampires, but not so easy to master: Blood Sucker.

All Vampires drank blood and could therefore easily awaken this Soul Class. This Soul Class increased their ability to metabolize the blood of their own species, but also of species other than their own. If these Vampires were willing to diversify their diet and suffer a few episodes of excruciating diarrhea, this Soul Class could eventually lead to Soul Classes of much higher tiers such as Universal Blood Sucker or Blood Evolver.

As Carmin could already consume other types of humanoid blood thanks to her Blood Human Bloodline, she was obviously aiming for one of these two Soul Classes, but unfortunately she had quickly realized that it was much harder to endure than it looked.

Besides her persistent and obsessive bloodlust, non-human blood still tasted disgusting on her tongue, forcing her to exert an immense willpower to overcome her revulsion and diversify her diet. It would take her quite some time to meet the requirements of a better Soul Class.

Sensing what was bothering her, Jake summarily explained,

"I think I've met the requirements for a much better Soul Class. If this goes as planned, my chances of rescuing Wyatt will be much higher."

It was as vague an answer as it could be, but it was enough to reassure Carmin. The duo then made their way through the grimy, narrow alleys of Laudarkvik's slums, finally reaching the Cathedral Square a few minutes later.

"This should be the place." The young woman said in a hesitant tone.

Hesitant because the supposedly Prophetic Stele in the center of the square was black with filth and from the smell it had been used as a pissing spot by many tramps and hobos.

"Are you sure you want to touch that?" She winced as she plugged her nose. One more step closer and she might throw up her breakfast.

"I'll have to..." Jake frowned as he smelled the ammoniated, foul-smelling scent assaulting his nostrils. The smell was so strong that his eyes involuntarily began to water.

As he took a tiny whiff of air through his nose, Jake's eyes bulged as if he had just been kneed in the testicles and his body jerked reflexively.

His arm outstretched in front of him, an Aether Symbol as large as himself that no one could see save the other Players formed in front of him and a burst of purging flames shot out, incinerating the Prophetic Stele and everything around it. With his telekinesis, Jake confined the flames in a funnel, forcing them to billow into the sky.

The impressive inferno drew the attention of the crowd, causing a slight panic, but when the flames finished burning out, an intact Stele covered with several inches of ash reappeared in the center of the square. The stench of urine and other filth had been completely purged.

"Phewee... Remind me not to hire you to clean my house." Carmin whistled in mock amazement as he contemplated his handiwork. "I would like to still have a place to sleep after your intervention."

"You can't afford to hire me to clean your place anyway." Jake retorted laconically.

"Hehe, what about something else?" She fluttered her eyelashes in a suggestive pose before realizing he wasn't even looking at her. Seeing that an old soot-covered stele attracted him more than her, she couldn't help but sigh. What a boring man.

'And a grudge-holder.' She couldn't help but add inwardly as she saw his cold demeanor with her. She hoped he would apologize first, but it seemed she would have to make the first move. So be it. She wasn't that petty. Especially, since he had just saved her ass and hadn't refused to help her.

"By the way Jake... For what happened three months ago at the Mutant Office, I'm sorry. Sincerely." She apologized with eyes averted and cheeks slightly pink in embarrassment.

Nervous, she fiddled with her long hair, playing with her curls, but when the answer of the interested party took time to come, her face darkened.

Radio silence.

Finally finding the courage to stare directly at him, she almost fainted with anger when she discovered that he had already put his hand on the Prophetic Stele, his mind already elsewhere.

While Carmin was ranting at him and herself for her bad timing, Jake's consciousness had returned to that infinite space filled with constellations interconnected through an incomprehensible network of light. In some places he could vaguely recognize the pattern of some of his Soul Glyphs, but the network was constantly changing, making it extremely mysterious and unfathomable despite his recent progress as a Rune Engraver.

This modeling of his inner Soul was still fascinating, but he also knew that he was far from being at the level to even begin to delve into it.

[List of available Soul Classes:]

[Tier 1: Sprinter, Swimmer, Flyer, Puncher, Kicker, Headbutter, Screamer, Grunter, Eater...]

[Tier 2: Carpenter, Warden, Miner, Farmer, Hunter, Technician, Ranger, Acrobat, Barkeeper, Herbalist, Torturer, Tamer, Psychologist, Actor, Astronomist, Moneylender, Butcher, Tailor, Tanner, Brawler, Engineer, Mercenary, Soldier, ect...]

[Tier 3: Gladiator, Blacksmith, Barbarian, Swordman, Marksman, Assassin, Spy, Monster Hunter, Pyrotechnician, Enslaver, Artist, Soul Torturer, Fire Mage, Light Mage, Earth Mage, Spirit Mage, Ice MageSlayer, Destroyer, Mentalist, Illusionist, ect...]

[Tier 4: Body Enhancer, Designer, Alchemist, Berserker, Terraformer, Survivor, Geneticist, Savior, Survivor, Hero, Challenger, Inventor, Master of Arms, Monster Slayer, Clone Slayer, Mage, Beast Master, Curse Breaker ect...]

[Tier 5: Spellcaster, Rune Engraver, Warmage, Elementalist, Clone Slayer, Arcanist, Ruler, Sunlord, Paragon, Chameleon, Ordeal Player, Myrtharian, Myrmidian, Kintharian, Eltarian, Demon Slayer, Were-being Slayer...]

[Tier 6: Harbinger of Chaos, Plot Armor Wearer, Ordeal Ace, Immortal, Sower of Chaos, Daemonifier, Rune Warrior, Rune Master, Knowledge Thirster, Unperishable Soul].

[Tier 7: Aetherist, Archon.]

The list hadn't changed too much since he'd last seen it, but his gaze immediately fell on the Soul Class he was looking for: Aetherist.

"Bingo." Jake exulted proudly with also a hint of relief. If this Soul Class hadn't appeared, he didn't know what he would have done.

In the list he noticed intriguing new additions like Rune Warrior, Knowledge Thirster, Unperishable Soul or Archon. Were-being Slayer was probably a salute to his victory over the Alpha Were-Eagle Lansho.

Rune Warrior and Rune Master were self-explanatory. These two Soul Classes reflected how he intended to use his newfound mastery of Aether Runes in battle. If he chose one of them, he could expect an immediate power boost.

Perhaps the Words of Power would tire him less or be more effective. Perhaps he would gain a whole range of offensive and defensive skills that would exploit his prior Rune mastery, but the unintended consequence would be an obsessive passion not for the study of Runes and languages, but for their application in combat.

? ?? ??-?? ????. ??? While in the short term this might be beneficial, in the long term it would likely become a hindrance in his evolution as an accomplished Aetherist.

In this respect, Knowledge Thirster was much more interesting but also much more dangerous. On the surface, it sounded even better than Aetherist with probably absurd ease of learning and understanding in all areas. The trade-off would be the inability to prioritize the things that really mattered, because to a Knowledge Thirster everything was worth learning.

Without a strong will, it was a risky choice and based on his experience as a Rune Engraver, Jake did not feel up to the challenge.

Archon was placed in the same tier as Aetherist, so it had to be a formidable Soul Class. Commonly in the literature, an Archon was a very powerful mage with divine abilities. Jake was obviously not anywhere near that, but what made Archons unique and the reason they were given a pseudo-divine credential was that they could bestow magical abilities on the selected ones of their choosing.

Intuitively, he concluded that it must refer to his ability to produce lasting Aether Spells and Skills for himself and others, but it was still less interesting than Aetherist in the long run.

Thus, without hesitation he validated his choice.

Chapter 728: Rune Aetherist

[Selection of Aetherist as your Soul Class confirmed.]

[You already have a Soul Class, do you want to replace it with the new one or integrate it?]

Jake pondered the question for a moment, but after Xi's clarification, he selected the second option with confidence.

[Your Spirit Body and Soul are resilient enough to withstand integration. Request for integration accepted.]

[Integration in progress...]

[Integration complete. New Soul Class determined.]

[Soul Class: Beginner Rune Aetherist: 60% Intelligence, Perception, Extrasensory Perception, 50% Vitality and Constitution, 35% Strength and Agility per Spirit Body level.]

[Related Soul Class Skills:]

[Rune Engraving: Easier understanding of any Rune. Any Rune that is drawn, engraved once correctly, can be instinctively reproduced the subsequent times].

[Deciphering/Coding: Rune Engravers are experts at deciphering languages using unknown alphabets or symbols and excel at creating any form of coherent code based on clear principles...]

[Word of Power Magic: By infusing enough willpower and Soul Energy into the written words and runes, these can come to fruition].

[Aether affinity: You are loved by the Dream Aether. The Dream Aether has become easier to perceive and control and tends to flow towards you. Epiphanies and other enlightenment moments are more likely to occur. Your Aether Spells are twice as powerful and the Aether consumed also recharges twice as fast.]

[Aether Compression/Expansion: With effort and patience you can change the size of your Aether Runes and Symbols.]

[Instant Casting: All previously mastered Aether Spells that are below a Grade 1 Bloodline can be cast instantly.]

BOOM!

As soon as Jake received the succession of notifications, he felt that sensation of having his Soul shattered, then rebuilt in a split second. For a moment, he really felt like he didn't exist anymore. When he felt himself again, he had become a different person.

The Aether whose very existence had been ruthlessly suppressed on Quanoth became clear in his mind once again. His Aether Stats which had been forcibly capped at 1000 pts instantly returned to their pre-Ordeal value, and then very quickly soared beyond it.

The Aether flow presence around him appeared so genuine and real to him, that he even felt a jarring sense of suffocation. It was as if he was sitting at the bottom of a pool filled with Aether and he could feel its influence on his movements, and all the Aetheric reactions occurring constantly within his body and mind.

Terrifying.

And at the same time, fascinating. After the initial surprise, Jake sank into a sort of compelling trance and the tumultuous, oppressive Aether flow seemed to clear, giving way to patterns, currents, and... Something else.

For the first time, Jake thought he sensed the influence of someone or something on this cluster of primordial energy. It was different from a presence, but for lack of better words he had to settle for that one. Especially since he didn't feel just one presence.

'The Oracle and Auras? Other people?' Jake muttered in a state between dream and wakefulness.

[Jake wake up!]

Xi's urgent cries in his mind were not the ones that snapped him out of his trance, but rather a searing pain radiating throughout his Soul. Instantly regaining lucidity, Jake used the Spirit Link to check the state of his paralyzed body against the Stele, and an unpleasant surprise greeted him.

"Who are you?" Jake growled grimly as he turned his head 180 degrees to glare at the assailant who had just stabbed his body with a strange energy blade. It protruded from his torso, its tip disappearing inside the Stele.

The hilt of the sword was made of an ordinary wood and had no guard, as if the weapon was not finished. In contrast, the straight blade resembled a stormy sky, the deafening rumble of thunder and the numbing din of a hurricane erupting from it.

This blade was no ordinary blade. It had managed to touch his Soul inside the Prophetic Stele while his Oracle Shield was activated. The Oracle Shield wrapped tightly around his body, leaving no space, but he had not anticipated that this protection would not extend to the part of his Soul inside the Stele, let alone that it could be breached. Earlier, the Stele had easily withstood his flames, hence his surprise.

When his mind was in the Stele, it was as if he was cut off from the world and time seemed to tick by in slow motion. To have injured him in such a short time, this assassin had attacked him a few tenths of a second after he had placed his hand on the Stele.

Unluckily for his attacker... This assassination attempt was doomed to fail. The Oracle Shield had done its job and his Soul and Spirit Body were not the same as three months ago.

[Spirit Body level: 28>34 (Digitized)]

[Species: Silver Myrtharian]

[Class: Rune Aetherist]

[HP: 52000>212000 (Regen: 4940.2>29 093HP/min)]

[Strength: 960>12384]

[Agility: 505>6714.5]

[Constitution: 5200>21200]

[Vitality: 4030>15 950]

[Intelligence: 2184>6342]

[Perception: 4568>13251.4]

[Extrasensory Perception: 2016>6797]

[Luck: 34>51]

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

[Aether Stats: 3127.3> 3686.]

[Aether Core: 5620 points.]

[Reiga Core lvl 1.]

The current Jake... Was beyond recognition. His appearance hadn't changed due to the Miniaturization spell, but his stats... Six more Spirit Body levels wasn't anything to write home about, but combined with his Soul Class change and the intensive training he had just endured... It was only a short step to calling him a monster.

The formidable energy he felt rising from deep within himself was incomparable to that of the past, and all he had to do was inadvertently release control over his Bloodline to instantly transform into a gargantuan Myrtharian, an unstoppable and nearly indestructible war machine.

The assailant and her little junk blade were obviously no match for him. Jake was confident that if the Alpha Were-Eagle Lansho came back to life he would be able to crush it without having to resort to his Runes or Bloodline Ignition.

Removing his hand from the Stele, Jake slowly turned around, his body realigning properly with his head backwards and a glance later without resorting to the Oracle Scan he said,

"I remember you. You are the White Were-Hawk who did not participate in that battle before. You'd better give up... They've had it coming."

The reason Jake was so forgiving after almost being murdered was twofold. First, because he was not fully out of his trance, his mind still elsewhere, marveling at the currents of Aether dancing around him. The blade stuck in his chest and the one who wielded it was meaningless in comparison. Next, it wasn't a scary Were-Hawk standing in front of him, but a young woman not even sixteen years old.

Her long, braided hair with gold rings was white in the image of her transformed appearance, as were the feathers covering the backs of her arms that looked like proto-wings. She wasn't tall, a meter sixty at most, the top of her head not even reaching his shoulders in his miniaturized form (1 meter 90). She was certainly pretty, with curves in the right places, but she was still petite with pale skin and baby cheeks.

Her cuteness and immaturity would not have been enough to get his forgiveness, but the tears and distress on her face were enough to curb his killing intent. Well, there was one last reason. His cousin Kevin was also there and one look made him understand that killing this young woman would affect their relationship as well as being a huge mistake.

His gaze then swept over the rest of the place, landing briefly on Carmin, still in shock from that lightning ambush, and then the other Were-beings present. Rather than the young woman in tears and his cousin Kevin, it was the huge Were-Lion in armor in the background that caught his attention.

It was a huge humanoid beast of five meters in height, which in many ways shared a certain resemblance with Mufasa. The main difference between the two was that this creature was primarily human.

His mane was so dark that it was almost black, a sign of the dominant male in a pride of lions. The overwhelming aura and majesty emanating from this Were-Lion was unlike that of the Alpha Were-Eagle he had defeated in the past. They were in a whole different league.

[Lysander, Were-Lion lvl 89.]

? ?? ??-?? ??? ???? 'I see... So this is the first seat of the Were-beings. No wonder he wants me dead.' Jake finally realized as he consulted the Oracle Scan result.

Haynt had said that Kenway, the strongest of the Were-beings was a long time friend of his. The latter was also Lysander's older brother, but Jake wasn't counting on his help to get out of this mess. For the same reason, he couldn't kill his brother Lysander unless he gave up his support completely.

Withdrawing the miraculous blade from his chest without flinching, Jake continued to stare disdainfully at the Were-Lion the entire time, completely ignoring the young woman clutching her sword's hilt. Seeing the ease with which he had taken her attack, she could only be seized with an immense feeling of despair.

Was getting her revenge really a vain hope?

Chapter 729: Good Sword

"It is." Jake replied calmly as he read her face. Shifting his gaze back to Lysander, he added coolly, "You can't kill me either. None of you can..."

This was not idle talk. Unless Kenway, Lysander's reclusive older brother, showed up, they didn't stand a chance. That was how sure he was of his new abilities.

His Strength and Agility, his previous weak points, had been amplified more than ten times their initial values. His other stats, which were already his fortes, had been multiplied by a factor of three or four. Even his Luck had increased markedly over the past few months. Adding the assets of his new Soul Class, he was supremely confident.

? ?? ??-??? ??, ??? And this confidence, his enemies could sense. Were-beings had unparalleled instincts and senses due to their bestial lineage. Although Jake was only level 34 according to their assessment system, one had to keep in mind that his Spirit Body was 12 times denser than normal due to his bloodline.

In practice, the spiritual aura emanating from him was comparable to a level 45-50 native. It still wasn't enough to scare these elite Were-beings, but the contrast with their survival instincts that screamed disaster made the situation even more perplexing.

Qewie, the young woman who had tried to stab Jake with her magic blade, was the one most aware of his abnormality. Three months earlier his aura was much weaker, but that hadn't stopped him from defeating her foster uncle Lansho. She knew that once serious, this Guilty could summon terrifying forces, like that frightening fireball...

Just thinking about it, a cold shiver ran down her spine, her whole body covered with a thin film of sweat. Realizing that she was standing less than a meter away from such a formidable entity, she suddenly had a whole new perspective on the precariousness of her existence.

Her survival instinct and fear overriding everything else, she leapt backwards with a mighty flap of her wings, reluctantly leaving her beloved sword in Jake's hand. It was a legendary blade of her clan that had accompanied her all her life and had saved her life many times, but between life and this weapon the choice was clear.

"Good sword." Jake praised, fiddling with the weapon between his fingers with undisguised curiosity.

[Bronze Mana-Artifact: Tempest Sword: A magical sword forged by a Wad-zoos-en Grandmaster Blacksmith thousands of years ago. The handle was carved from a 500 year old Wad-zoos-en shinbone, into which was inserted several precious magical materials belonging to various mythological species such as the Thunderbird, the Storm Phenix and the Garuda. The set was then enchanted by Grandmaster Enchanters giving it its abilities. The resulting blade has its own microcosm, a mixture of wind, lightning and chaos. It has the attribute " Unavoidable ", and can shift between phases to cross obstacles at the will of its wielder. The blade can be retracted or extended as desired, but its mana consumption increases drastically. For a length of one meter, the Sword of Storms can currently remain in use for 5 minutes.]

This was his third Bronze Artifact after the Purgatory and the Black Tablet given by Astrid. However, unlike the other two items, it was not an Aether Artifact, but a Mana Artifact.

If Jake was inexperienced, he would have been immediately disappointed. But, as with the Purgatory, which was once a Grandmaster Fluid Artifact, he was hopeful that he could modify it with his end-of-Ordeal rewards. Even if it wasn't possible, with his recent progress as an Aetherist he wasn't completely out of solutions.

"Thanks for the gift." Jake chuckled tauntingly as he retracted the blade. "Just for this tribute, I'm willing to spare you."

The entire time he had been gripping the chaos blade, he hadn't dared deactivate his Oracle Shield. It was a good thing that Qewie's attack was considered over, or he would have been unable to grab it without her permission. He may have made huge strides in terms of Constitution and Vitality, but this blade could still easily cut him.

Carmin was stunned by the course of events. The surprise ambush against Jake had already made her panic, but the way he had thwarted the assault and his attitude afterwards had made her lose all her composure.

It was important to keep in mind that this ambush had been carried out in less than a second by Qewie. The other Were-beings and Lysander had not participated in the attack, nor had they tried to stop Carmin. Apart from surrounding them, they had taken no initiative and that spoke volumes about their confidence in Qewie and her sword. Even according to their most pessimistic predictions, Jake should not have escaped.

The ease with which he had foiled their strategy changed many things. Chagrined, the huge Were-Lion at the head of the group stomped forward, snarling with an intimidating air,

"Hmmp! I, Lysander, swear in the name of all Were-beings that we are ready to bury the hatchet with you and your companions if you promise not to interfere with our business anymore. Do you accept?"

That was what Jake wanted to hear, but he couldn't show it. He wasn't afraid of Lysander and his minions, but a fight here would destroy a good chunk of the Outer City. Not to mention the casualties and collateral damage, it would be like proclaiming his position loud and clear to his enemies.

On top of that, there was still the risk that those scheming bastards would take advantage of the situation to severely punish him or the other Mutants. He may have been a Player, but technically he was still part of Aisling's faction. If he cared about her trust he couldn't throw it away over a common street fight.

While Jake remained unmoved, coldly contemplating all his options with the final intention of accepting, Lysander had a completely different interpretation of his silence. The lack of response annoyed him greatly, but like Jake he didn't want to risk a battle of this magnitude in the middle of town.

But above all, a little voice inside him told him that the result of this battle would not please him much. Unwillingly and reluctantly, he offered a new incentive,

"I also promise that my clan, including all Were-felins and also what remains of the Avians and Were-birds will withdraw permanently from the conflict against Aisling and the other Mutants."

That was the most he could offer. Anything more, and he risked conflict with the other clans of Were-beings. Sable of the Were-Wolves and Lansho were dead, but in truth there were as many clans as there were animals among the Were-beings.

The three seats on the Council were very strong, but they owed their position to the strength of their respective clans. In fact, there were several dozen Were-beings with fighting power comparable to theirs. By showing up at the council, the three seats were in the spotlight, but only they knew how many enemies working in the shadows they had on their own side.

Yet Jake continued to ignore him, still thinking about the best approach. This time, a surge of anger erupted in Lysander's chest and the lion warrior snarled ominously from his throat. Just as he was about to throw diplomacy out the window and attack, Jake blurted out casually,

"Deal."

It was as if they had just been forgiven. Everyone breathed a long sigh of relief, including Carmin and Lysander. The only disgruntled one was Qewie having lost her fetish sword.

"Since we're allies, can I have my sword back?" She asked through clenched teeth trying to adopt a gracious smile.

"No." Jake sneered and turned his back to her. "Carmin, let's get out of here."

"Sure..."

Helpless and deeply frustrated, the Were-beings could only stare at them as they strutted away into the dark alleys of the slums. Once out of their sight and when even their sensitive noses could no longer pick up their scent, Lysander bowed in a sorrowful and apologetic manner,

"I'm sorry, princess. I have failed in my duty."

Qewie clutched her dainty fists as she trembled, but no tears fell from her eyes. Finally, she relaxed and her fists opened again.

"I don't blame you, Lysander." She helped him to straighten his back, displaying for the first time an angelic smile capable of warming the coldest of hearts. "It wasn't your fault. The mere fact that you agreed to accompany me here proves your loyalty. If all Were-beings were like you, Laudarkvik would already belong to us..."

Becoming solemn, the Were-lion changed the subject,

"I know that Lansho meant a lot to you, Princess. But they had chosen their side. Their bad luck was to run into this Jake guy at the wrong time, but by knowingly choosing to collaborate with these Demons and Vampires their end was foregone."

"I know..."

"In that case..." Lysander wore a hesitant expression.

"I know what you want to say, but let's wait a little longer... I'm not ready to forgive him yet, but the Were-beings' lives will always come before mine. So don't worry."

Chapter 730: Walk In The Park

While Lysander was relieved by the young princess' rational mind, there was a certain Werebear not far from them who also breathed a sigh of relief: Kevin.

Since the Third Ordeal, Jake's philandering, brawling cousin had changed a lot too, both physically and mentally. In his human form, he was over two metres thirty, with a Herculean musculature and a hairiness matching that of his bloodline's totem animal. Despite the influence of the Myrtharian Body Passive, he had managed to retain his brown hair and green eyes, but their color had whitened by about two shades and now had a sort of otherworldly glow to them that they didn't have before.

In his current Werebear form, Kevin was an oversized grizzly bear with silvery-brown fur that stood almost two stories tall. This hybrid appearance was more lanky than that of a simple bear standing on its hind legs. His arms were longer, his shoulder build wider, his waist narrower and his muscles more toned. His morphology allowed him to easily wield a weapon or wear armor, but his beastly offensive attributes were also even more developed than those of a bear of the same race.

Whether it was his jaw, his fangs, his claws, all were clearly longer and sharper, almost disproportionate to the rest of his body, but he could retract the length of these natural weapons at will.

But if there was one thing to remember about all of these changes, it was the flame burning in his eyes. When he had just received his Bloodline, his yellow-orange irises glowed dimly when he transformed or used his powers. Now they were a glowing inferno and his irises were almost as crimson as those of a Vampire like Wyatt.

Indeed, over the past year plus the three months of this Fourth Ordeal, Kevin had never slackened his efforts and had become an Alpha Werebear. The larger his pack, the stronger he became and the more power he could draw from his subordinates.

Before the Fourth Ordeal began, he had managed to convert 40 of the new recruits after the Dungeon Digestor episode with the approval of Will and Jake. Unlike Will, who took a lot of initiative, Kevin had asked his cousin's approval before initiating his big project.

The 40 Werebears of the Myrtharian Nerds under his authority had not spawned near him, but they could feel each other's presence on Quanoth. Over the past three months, they had come together, with their Alpha serving as a rallying point.

During this same period, he had also gained the respect and defeated several other Alphas from minor packs and the number of Werebears under his command had grown to 113, including 3 other Alpha Werebears. Their willing submission had greatly increased his powers. Two more Alphas to convince and he would become a new Super Alpha.

Qewie and Lysander were obviously unaware of his schemes. All they could see of him was that he was capable, efficient and obedient. Although he was a new member on probation, he had proven that he could be counted on.

To avoid arousing suspicion, Kevin had not explained his origins and intentions to his new recruits, waiting patiently for the Myrtharian Nerds' Werebears to join him. It has finally happened.

Just now, when Jake had foiled Qewie's assassination attempt, he had succeeded in getting his message across. So it was with great calm that he read Jake's private message after receiving a system notification.

"See you at midnight at location xxx".

? ?? ??-??? ??, ?,?,? The xxx were obviously the coordinates of the magmatic chamber where Jake had secluded himself the past three months. Kevin couldn't help but chuckle under his breath as he found out where he had been hiding all this time.

'That's my cousin, all right.'

"Kevin, why are you laughing to yourself? You're creepy..." Qewie asked with her beautiful face suddenly filled with suspicion.

Realizing his slight misdemeanor, he rearranged his iron mask and apologized, pretending to despise the arrogance of this Mutant, who did not know the difference between heaven and earth. Qewie's and Lysander's doubts did not disappear completely, but it put them at ease for the time being.

As they left, Kevin looked back in the direction his cousin had faded and muttered inwardly with a look of concern,

"Whatever you're planning, Jake, hurry up. We're running out of time."

His conduct did not escape the notice of either Qewie or Lysander, but this time they were wrong in their interpretation, much to his delight. Fate could sometimes do things right. Strangely enough, this new mistake had just exonerated him by clearing up their doubts.

"It was your cousin, right? Is that going to be a problem?" Carmin questioned Jake anxiously after they left.

Having only known Kevin at his worst in the Third Ordeal, she only knew him as a cannibal. Even Wyatt, who had been with him and even led him during that time, said he had rarely seen such a cruel beast. The Corruption created by Nylreg had its part to play, as did his Werebear Bloodline, but it was a fact that Kevin possessed a certain darkness within him.

Knowing full well what was bothering her, Jake replied serenely,

"Don't worry. We can trust him."? ??? a ???e?

Nobody was perfect. Unless one was a monk who had renounced all desire and emotion and transcended his biological and psychological needs, no one was infallible. If there was a desire, negative emotion or drive to be satisfied, the Corruption could creep into people's hearts and amplify it until it overtook them.

Jake was no different than his cousin Kevin. Without his atypical personality and his mind-enhancing Bloodline, he would never have awakened his True Will stat and he would have like his cousin at the end of the Third Ordeal slaughtered everyone, friend and foe alike.

"Where do we go from here?" Carmin asked more calmly now that she was reassured.

"Really? Have you already forgotten why you came looking for me?" Jake teased her, rolling his eyes.

The young woman's lovely face lit up when she heard his answer, which made her look even more beautiful.

" Still, that's not the right direction..." She muttered with confusion.

"The Were-beings found us easily." Jake explained calmly. "I don't see why the other Factions wouldn't have found us either. My appearance must have been reported as soon as I arrived in town by a bribed guard or one of the beggars serving as their eyes in the Outer City. We need to lose our potential pursuers first."

Carmin became serious as she listened to his reasoning. Instantly, her thick blood aura was suppressed and her step became lighter and lighter until it became barely audible, as if she were as light as air. Not to be outdone, Jake began to levitate progressively, his boots touching the ground less and less, until they no longer touched the ground at all.

The couple turned right into an alley ending in a dead end and Jake wrapped his arm around her hip, pulling her against him as if they were a real couple.

Those who were tailing them sensed something was wrong and abandoned all thoughts of stealth as they rushed into the alley. Sadly, their bad hunch was not an illusion and when they found themselves stuck at the dead end without finding anyone, their faces turned pale.

One of them, a kind of black elf with eight violet eyes who seemed to be their leader, grabbed an ovoid device from his belt, then placed it in front of his lips and said shamefully,

"We've lost track of them, sir."

Obviously, Jake and Carmin hadn't just vanished into thin air. Jake had used his teleportation skill to lose his pursuers. With the shocking increase in his stats, Jake could now perceive the entire district by scanning it with his mental sense and teleporting away from his pursuers was a breeze.

In reality, they hadn't run far. The first teleportation had them appearing in a dusty attic in an adjacent alley, while the second teleportation allowed them to slip out of the slums for good. After a series of successive teleports, they arrived at the foot of the grand staircase and its multiple checkpoints leading to the Vampire District.

The only problem was that the staircase was far too long for Jake to teleport to without visual cues. If Jake could see anything from his position, so could his enemies and they would be flushed out in an instant. Vampires were no ordinary beings and deceiving their vigilance was nearly impossible. Nothing escaped their keen senses, not even the slightest air movement.

"Now what?" Carmin asked with some anticipation in her eyes. Jake's abilities were truly versatile. It was as if he had a solution for everything. Three months ago, he hadn't given her such an impression of omnipotence.

"No choice. We'll take the stairs." Jake shrugged with a smirk.

His free arm made hundreds of motions at a frequency imperceptible to the naked eye, but the flow of Aether rearranging itself around him moved hundreds of times faster. Carmin thought she saw a fleeting glimpse of an Aether Symbol for a brief moment, but it was gone almost immediately.

"Let's go." Jake said as he let go of her hip.

Puzzled, Carmin was taken aback when she saw him striding briskly toward the stairs, completely exposed to the guards' sight. Horrified, she thought he had decided to force his way up, but soon she noticed that the guards were ignoring him.

Suddenly, Jake's annoyed voice echoed telepathically in her mind,

"What are you waiting for? Follow me."

Flustered, she ran after him while vigilantly glaring at the guards a few feet away who were unable to perceive her existence.