Chapter 1 – The Failed Human Resources Liaison

The sun’s glare made the heat of the day that much more intense. As I walked along the ridge of the mountain, sweat beaded up on my brow and stung my eyes. I was out for a ten-day hike, a 100 mile trek through the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. It was a reprieve from my endless hours working as a vagabond sous chef. The terrain was very manageable, and the trail well marked. That was why I was shocked when the entire trail gave way beneath me and I was sliding down the mountain in a rockslide. Fortunately, the pain didn’t last long as large rocks quickly crushed me to death.

I was now in a simple beige room with no doors or windows, basically a box. A large black desk with multiple screens facing away from me dominated most of the expansive desk in front of me. Behind the desk sat a middle-aged Asian man in a dark blue suit with a gray tie. He began to explain he was the HR director for my reincarnation. He explained I had accumulated enough positive karma that I would be able to direct my reincarnation. Well, I would have some input anyway. He seemed extremely bored with the process and kept checking the screen on the left like he was checking emails or something.

He spent time explaining I could go to another universe in his sphere of influence or stay in this one. After my shock subsided, I inquired about a universe with magic. He tapped away and there were two options with high aetheric content, that was what magic was apparently called, aether. I was all in immediately. He began tapping away and asked if I wanted to remain human which I replied to the affirmative. I didn’t want to be an animal. Maybe he was referring to elves, dwarves and such? He was already past the screen though. A few more taps on the keyboard, and he checked his screen on the left again. Then before we could continue, he swore and slammed his fist down on the table rattling the screens and desk. He quickly stood up and walked through the wall to his left.

I sat there puzzled and after a time cautiously walked around the desk. The screen had an open email saying the man had been fired and indicated that this was his last shift. The language was not English but I was still able to read it. I thought was curious. I muttered to myself that I think he left a little early as I was still in limbo for my reincarnation. I looked at the other screens which had my information and was surprised I could read it as once again the language was definitely not English. Some universal comprehension in this room?

I walked to the wall where the man had disappeared and found it solid after running my hands along the slightly warm surface. After a few minutes I got bolder and sat down in front of the screens taking the chair and began delving into my file. It took a few minutes to figure out the navigation folders on the screens. It was all very intuitive. My reincarnation was open and currently showed random human. I quickly found I could edit the body. Well, no harm in cementing some things up, right? I started by making a tall male physique with a linebacker build, green eyes and dark black hair who was well endowed below the waist. I slid the aging ‘expectation’ to the max, giving me about 150 years of prospective life according to the screen translator. Then I got to the interesting parts with abilities, traits and skill affinities. It read like a game to me.

Each had seven tiers of power with tier one being the lowest. If I selected random I would be assigned two to eight points worth of abilities based on my karmic accumulator. The random generator clearly showed my chance of getting each value. The table read 70% for 2 points, 25% for 3 points, 4% for 4 points, 0.9% for five points, 0.09% for six points, 0.009% for seven points and 0.001% for eight points. Tier 1 abilities had a cost of 1, tier 2 a cost of 2, tier 3 a cost of 3, tier 4 a cost of 5, tier 5 had a cost of 7, tier 6 had a cost of 11 and tier 7 had a cost of 13. I looked at the random generator for points and tried to manually enter a larger number.

After some attempts I found the largest number accepted was 23. That was much better than a small chance of getting 8 points so I entered 23 and confirmed the entry. Next, I found I could select my abilities rather than use the random generator.

I was getting worried someone would show up soon so I selected things from the massive lists that popped out to me. I didn't delve too much into the full descriptions as I felt I was pressed for time. I was doing something I should not be doing. My selections...

13 points, Tier 7…create metal using aether

5 points, Tier 4…major aether core, multiply base aether by 5

3 points, Tier 3…metal shaping

1 point, Tier 1…slowed aging, age 50% slower

1 point, Tier 1…access person

So, with my selections I was now fairly certain I would be able to create silver and gold from thin air. Maybe it was not the best the choice but I didn’t want to be some hero who went out and slayed monsters and saved maidens. Give me unlimited wealth and living comfortable in a city. I was confident in my choices and even found a box to check that allowed me to keep my past life memories. I checked that without hesitation.

The next screen was for traits, and it was similar to the abilities page but were non-magical in nature. It seemed the number of points was typically between 2 and 7 for a human but I was unable to enter anything and the value was set at 0. A quick search and I found I maybe had maxed out my possible points on abilities or maybe it was because I was human, the text was confusing and I didn’t have time to delve further into the legal verbiage. There was no override, at least none that I could find. I skipped to the next screen.

The last section was a skill affinity screen. It gave bonuses to learning skills. There was a very long list of skills and I skimmed them. I found 23 schools of magic which drew my attention immediately. Skill affinities ranged from 1 to 7. At tier 1 affinity there was 25% increase to learning speed of a skill. It doubled at Tier 2 to 50%, tier 3 was 100% and tier 4 was 200%. Tier 5 was 250% but also gave 25% to the effectiveness of the skill as well. Tier 6 was 300% to learning speed and 50% to the skill effectiveness. Tier 7 was 300% and 100% to the effectiveness. Once again, I was locked out of editing the points but my default was 5 points. If I selected randomize it would be 0 to 0 so I stuck with the 5 points. The costs mirrored the costs I noted for abilities.

I decided to choose the following:

5 points, tier 4, healing magic skill

I felt great about my decision in terms of setting myself up for a great easy life, learning healing magic 3 times faster than normal should be a good back up plan if my Scrooge McDuck fantasies of swimming in a vault of gold coins failed. The screen progressed to the next phase of my reincarnation. I was now looking at a world in the universe I was going to be incarcerated into. It was not a world but in fact a Dyson sphere…the world magic stabilized the titanic shell and gave billions of square miles on the inner sphere to live on. The shell was thousands of miles thick with its own eco system as well, and if I was understanding everything properly the shell hosted millions of dungeons within the aether ley lines which were essentially the skeleton of the Dyson sphere. The outer surface of the shell, or Dark World had its own civilizations as well and it appeared some of them were space faring. Crap, the magnitude of everything. I was not so sure anymore. Hundreds of billions, probably trillions of people and species and monsters and threats quickly passed in front of me as I quickly paged through. I had a thought to go back and change my race but thought I wouldn’t have enough time to redo everything.

I quickly refined my searching. Technology did not work well on the inside of the sphere…well it needed specialized magitech to balance the technology in the aether rich environment. I was uncertain how much time I had left and the butterflies in my stomach were growing in premonition. Did I have some precognition? I did risk having my selections reset if someone showed up to replace my liaison. I should just jump in but was curious just speed up my searching.

The Dyson sphere was called a World Sphere…there were 23 of these spheres in each galaxy within the universe and the spheres were the origins of all magic in the universe. The further from the World Sphere the less dense the ambient aether was. Technology was secondary…but did exist…taking aether from the World Spheres in aether crystal form into the rest of the universe was a massive industry apparently. The World Spheres were also known as aether wells, essentially an unlimited source of magic stemming from the central sun and infusing the ley lines in the Dyson shell. Aether crystals could hold aether, like magic batteries. The easiest way to mine the crystals was through dungeons. Dungeon entrances were located all across the sphere and portaled dungeon divers to secure dungeon instances embedded in the massive ley lines that ran through the sphere. Passing into the interior of ley lines any other way was almost certain death. Basically this seemed like a gaming world.

The brightness of the room started dimming. Was the shift over? Was someone coming? Were they coming for me? My mind was racing at numerous possibilities as the lights faded. Ok, I didn’t want to push my luck anymore as the lighting was getting closer to darkness and the screens were fading slowly too like they were powering down. I went to the screen indicating where I would spawn in the sphere. I needed a stable civilization on the inner sphere surface as I liked sunlight. I quickly filtered the search criteria and found a place called Skyholme. These humans lived on a group of massive floating islands and had resided here for over 2300 years old it noted. A period of stability in a safe hold, good enough for me. Without reading further I selected and hit the complete button, finishing my reincarnation. A few errors popped up but I dismissed them as the text on the screen was so dark, I couldn’t read it anyway. My body slowly faded with my consciousness.

I awoke and found my mind and vision fuzzy. It took me awhile to figure out I was a baby in a womb. I guess I made a slight error as I had thought I would be reincarnated as a full-grown man. This might be better as I would be able to learn the idiosyncrasies of this fantastical magic world as I grew.