

Oracle 671

[Chapter 671 Ruthless To The Core](#)

At the same time as the explosion, heat-resistant walls sprang up from the ground and encapsulated Ruby inside to contain the blast, but also to raise the temperature inside dramatically.

These walls, made of an ultra-hard alloy and stacked one on top of the other to form a thick, 15m thick shell, were not the result of Jake's skill, but a simple exploitation of his Purgatory Dream's creative functions. Even if the detonation were ten times more powerful, these illusory walls would have succeeded in confining the blast.

That said, even with this precaution, Jake still found himself breathless from the shockwave when he reappeared 100 meters away. Nearby adventurers like Elduin and his companions were blown away except for the large dwarf who managed to stay in place by rooting his heavy axe into the ground.

Jake watched each adventurer present carefully, looking to see if any of them had been substituted by Ruby to take the blast in her stead. Finding neither an absent face nor a strand of silky white hair swaying in his field of vision, he finally relaxed and breathed a sigh of relief.

The walls made of a heat-resistant alloy glowed for a moment until they cooled down entirely. Jake waited a few more seconds, not letting up until he was completely sure the threat had been eliminated.

VRROUISSH!

Just as Jake thought the matter was over, an unexpected gust of wind, or rather an air blast of unparalleled violence, suddenly swept down from the sky, striking the ruined Guild and the adventurers still present to the point of slamming them to the ground. Those already stunned by the shockwave of the explosion were unable to react in time and the descending gust crushed their bones when it didn't directly break their necks for those with an inadequate posture.

VRROUISSH!

A second gust, this time even more terrible than the previous one, struck the earth with such power that all the still relatively intact debris was reduced to fine dust just from the sheer pressure squeezing them to the ground.

The C-rank adventurers still standing were also knocked to the ground this time, while the B-rank adventurers and above who didn't specialize in physical strength also fell to their knees. In comparison, Jake remained completely still in the middle of a lava depression, the only evidence that he had also been hit by the wind blast.

Jake was already looking up at the sky, squinting his eyes for the perpetrator. In an instant, he locked eyes with the culprit and blinked as he spotted the mammoth mythological beast approaching. These cataclysmic gusts of wind were only the direct consequence of its flapping wings.

Their wingspan was over a hundred meters, but the sheer speed of each flap was such that the black pegasus seemed to teleport several kilometers with each movement. Even so, Jake didn't think it was enough to generate such winds. Obviously, this nightmarish horse was also frighteningly heavy.

Faced with an even greater urgency, Jake immediately forgot about his original target.

The illusory ramparts imprisoning Ruby suddenly retracted, revealing a young woman with long silver hair completely unharmed. She didn't even have a scratch on her and her clothes were undamaged. Yet, she didn't look proud of herself at all, displaying instead an aggrieved and regretful expression.

'How did she do that?!' Jake was completely flabbergasted.

She hadn't teleported and she hadn't switched places with anyone either. He was certain that the explosion had hit her hard.

VRROOUIISH!

'Too late to worry about it. Time to go.' Jake immediately forgot his desire for revenge.

The third squall would be the last, and while that was great news for the adventurers still alive, it was the final death knell for the two alleged wrongdoers. Jake obviously had no idea that the Baron of Lodunvals held Ruby primarily responsible for this catastrophe and believed he was the sole target of this fearsome native.

Deep down, he resented being framed so unfairly when he wasn't hurting anyone. It was a debacle that would haunt his nightmares for a long time. That was why at that moment he took an extra, but completely unnecessary risk.

'I may have failed to kill you, but there's no way I'm going to be the only one hunted down like a common thug.' Jake muttered vindictively, as a hateful glint flared in his pupils. 'It's time to properly test this Rune Engraver Soul Class.'

As the huge black pegasus and its rider landed, demolishing a city block and causing a mini earthquake, Jake leapt into the air, stretching his arms out in front of him.

Completely merging his consciousness with that of the Purgatory Dream, he channeled his will into a single intention, which he then transmuted into a very precise injunction that he then visualized in Oraclean.

Almost instinctively, as if he had always known how to do this, his mind slipped into a special kind of trance and the Aether Runes that made up his Spirit Body began to operate in a mysterious and enigmatic way that he was not even aware of.

At that very moment, he felt an immense fatigue overwhelm him, combined with the onset of a headache and a mental fog, but he gritted his teeth and endured the ordeal. He refused to give up until he got his revenge!

'Word of Power Magic!' he thought inwardly.

"Reveal your true self!" Jake shouted hoarsely as he powered up his Purgatory.

In response to these words, gigantic, deep gashes cleaved through the city to carve these words into the Purgatory, causing another wave of panic and some hesitancy from Laudar and his pegasus. This Guilty was no easy prey at all!

Laudar and the other adventurers had no way of recognizing the giant cracks for what they really were, but Ruby could tell the difference straight away. A horrified expression contorted her face and as she looked up at Jake she caught the smug satisfaction in his smile.

"Jake! You'll pay for this!" She screamed madly.

Jake sneered disdainfully, giving her the finger.

"Try to survive first." He taunted her with a flying kiss.

The next moment, the innocent human figure that Ruby had so far managed to preserve was replaced by a 3.5 meter tall woman with extremely athletic features. A network of bluish veins reminiscent of liquid ice began to glow under her translucent, almost grayish skin. Her ears were pointed like an elf's, her irises had not changed, but a luminescent blue glow now pulsed in her pupils.

Like Jake, long crystalline claws and fangs confirmed her non-human status, while her physical transformation went even further, not only stopping at those expected of a Throsgenian or Myrtharian.

Indeed, her forearms had a metallic shine and texture, as if she had dipped her forearms in liquid silver. Her legs, previously covered by the boots and pants she had stumbled upon in a Lodunvals store, ripped the clothes that had become too small, also revealing their metallic silver texture.

As if that wasn't enough, a pair of silver wings folded behind her back and a small pair of horns of the same hue on either side of her forehead delivered the final blow, this time giving her the edge of a monster. The icy, corrupting energy that oozed forth from her body and freezing all matter, including the air, did nothing to convince her victims otherwise. She was still stunning, perhaps even more so, but it was no longer a beauty that humanity could accept.

"A-A Demon!" Laudar and the other surviving adventurers cried out at the same time.

Jake said nothing, staring at her for a brief second without blinking to etch the image in his memory forever.

"No doubt about it, you're a humanoid Digestor." Jake sighed in a low voice, but Ruby heard him perfectly, a faint anger and resentment flashing across her exquisite face.

As he said this, Jake suddenly felt the air temperature rise alarmingly. As a Myrtharian, this should have been the least of his worries, but his instincts, which rarely deceived him, told him this time that he had better avoid the next attack.

Turning his head toward the source of the unreal heat waves, Jake saw that the rider previously on the back of his pegasus had stepped down and summoned a small dark wooden wand that he was silently pointing at them. At its tip was a ball of plasma even purer than his own, but containing within it and wrapped in even more terrifying black lightning bolts.

As he scanned the black lightning, Jake broke out in a cold sweat and shot off into the sky without hesitation, his hasty departure leaving a trail of flames and a supersonic boom in his wake. Ruby, wanted to do the same, but when she tried to flee in the same direction as Jake, the same illusory walls that had imprisoned her sprang up from the earth by the hundreds, sealing Jake's escape route.

Vicious to the core, Jake went even further, erecting dozens of layers of ramparts around the entire ruined area, trapping Laudar, his pegasus and Ruby together.

"Fuck! Really ruthless to the core!" She cursed before cracking a complex smile.

The furious Baron obviously tried to destroy these illusory walls to prevent Jake from escaping and he almost succeeded. Of the hundreds of meters of hyper-resistant metal that Jake had erected, more than 200 were vaporized by his spell, the lightning bolts even passing through the entire structure like a red-hot whip through a lump of butter.

His pegasus, Actalaus, also rammed his head into those steel walls, forming deep indentations with each collision, before giving up a few blows later, staggering slightly from the dizziness.

Laudar was humiliated and infuriated, but he was a pragmatic man. He instantly accepted that one of the two guilty had escaped and shamelessly redirected his hatred at the only remaining target. His pegasus Actalaus did the same, revealing his sharp fangs in a toothy grin.

"Prepare to receive your punishment for sacking my city, young lady." The Baron declared cruelly, sadistically licking his lips.

[Chapter 672 Truly A Monster](#)

Ruby shuddered with disgust as she caught sight of his evil rictus betraying his spiteful intentions.

'Yet another one of those disgusting bastards, using his power and authority to satisfy his lust and get away with it. I bump into two or three of these guys every day at New Earth HQ.' She sneered with surliness.

The Baron was a man in his prime, brown hair draped over his shoulders, bushy eyebrows, slightly curved nose, sunburned skin, and quite an impressive build for a mage. He wore a dark robe usually worn by high-ranking wizards, but reinforced with armor plates and fine chain mail forged from a magical alloy brimming with energy. He wielded a sinuous wand no larger than a twig, and only a tad less rough, but a heavy claymore slung across his back told her that he also knew how to swing a sword when the situation called for it.

Seeing her frozen in place, Laudar vainly thought that she was scared stiff by his demonstration of power. Defenseless lambs staggered by terror like this one, he had met a lot of them during his career.

But just as he was wrong about Ruby, she was also wrong about his intentions. As creepy and insane as his sadistic smile appeared to be, the current Ruby didn't arouse him that much.

Sure, if the girl had kept an ordinary size and stayed true to her cuteness, her innocent airs and her inborn seductive assets, then maybe he would have been tempted. But facing a half-giant over three meters tall with such 'eccentric' cosmetic features... Laudar didn't have such a heavy taste.

On the other hand, slaughtering without any inhibition, spoiling his enemies' aspirations and witnessing their faces decompose in despair as they realized their helplessness and the nearness of their imminent death was his biggest guilty pleasure.

Laudar, notwithstanding, was not a lunatic. Regardless of his violent tendencies, the Baron was a necessary evil in the eyes of the Ret'Asi Empire. He deserved to rot in a cell as much as the inmates rotting in his own dungeons, but unlike them he had been perpetrating his crimes on the right people.

While his duties required him to ensure the safety of Lodunvals and protect its citizens, Ret'Asi did not dictate how he should do it, especially in this time of war and instability when the empire was facing a crisis, both external and internal.

As long as his territory was under control, taxes were paid and the main cities were safe, no one would question his leadership, even if it meant turning a blind eye to some crimes.

Usually, the Baron was quite self-controlled. He kept his impulses in check most of the time, killing only a servant, or even a guard from time to time when his temper flared. When he really couldn't take it anymore, he would summon his faithful pegasus Actalaus and fly to the Wilderness or a country bordering its borders to carry out a new round of slaughter.

In committing these acts he never revealed his identity, but many rumors had emerged during his decades of reign. Laudar may have been cautious, but his gigantic black pegasus did not go unnoticed.

Eleven years earlier, a prince of Khinchod, a Wengol-controlled nation, had finally tracked him down and paid assassins to eliminate him. He narrowly escaped death and since then has kept a low profile, never summoning his faithful pegasus again.

This prince had finally given up and as the years went by, the rumors had died down and his bellicose and cruel reputation had gradually mellowed. Unable to let off steam, he had channeled his attention into this new and highly ambitious project, but those two Guilties had ruined everything...

For that alone, they deserved the death penalty! The first one had escaped, but he would not let the young woman slip through his fingers.

For that... He had to stop her from moving first...

"Actalaus crush her legs!" Laudar ordered with a wicked chuckle.

"Gladly." The huge pegasus' deep voice reverberated like a drumbeat, rattling the ribcage of Ruby and the other adventurers still around.

"Protect me!" She shouted to the group of previously charmed adventurers. It didn't matter if it meant their deaths, she absolutely had to break out of here.

"As you wish."

The Paladin Captain and the two spearmen in heavy armor each carrying a heavy bulwark rushed fearlessly toward the titanic black pegasus, unaware of the suicidal nature of their action. They had already realized the absurdity of their behavior, but could not resist the urge to obey her. This insight struck them deeply, sending their minds reeling again.

The female mage with the side-shaved head also began to chant a long incantation and a beam of yellow and red light struck her three teammates, significantly boosting their strength and toughness. A second incantation formed a protective barrier around them.

The other hooded woman in the group also blurred into the shadows and instantly resurfaced above the neck of the winged horse, the tip of her enchanted dagger slashing straight at the beast's massive carotid artery.

The last golden-armored man in the group lunged toward the creature's hocks, brandishing a heavy cleaver over its head. Its speed was terrifying and each step would shatter the lava recently frozen by Ruby.

"What the fuck are you doing?!" Elduin hollered out in horror as he saw his lifelong comrades unhesitatingly comply with such an insane order.

The dwarf Bhammod was equally dumbfounded, but more mature than his friend, he wrinkled his nose and pulled the elf by the arm to prevent him from joining them. Elduin resisted, but the dwarf's iron grip was like an indestructible vise.

"Why?!" The elf roared with rage and incomprehension. A few minutes earlier everything was fine and just because they had crossed paths with a little bitch, their happy and successful life had suddenly turned into a disaster.

"It's too late for them." Bhammod shook his head. "Let's try to find a way out of here instead."

"How?"

The dwarf smiled ruefully.

"I'm a dwarf, don't forget that. Earth and metal hold no secrets for me."

No matter how much he boasted, when he touched one of the illusory steel walls Jake had erected his expression quickly turned gloomy.

'What the bloody heck is this metal? I can't even clearly count the number of different materials that go into this alloy. The metallurgical process used is even more unfathomable. I still feel the energy of these metals, but I have no control over it.'

"So?" Elduin asked optimistically, but the tears streaming down his face and his trembling voice revealed his true feelings.

For while the dwarf inspected the steel rampart, the pegasus Actalaus had finally sprung into action.

SMASH!

With an impossible-to-follow front hoof kick, he squashed one of the heavy armored spearmen, his blood and guts splattering in all directions, completely repainting the area.

The swordsman with the cleaver who was reaching for his hocks was stepped over by a leap of the beast and was also punished by an even more vicious back kick. The blast of air preceding the hoof strike had already ruptured its organs, while the real blow flattened its torso and head like a sheet of paper.

The female assassin who had tried to stab the pegasus' carotid artery only hit wind, garnering the mocking whinny of the beast. The wing flapped and its last memory was a huge wall of black feathers hitting her face at breakneck speed.

A firework display of blood and mushy organs rained down on the last three survivors. The second spearman, mad with anger and despair, furiously threw his weighty halberd at the beast, but the horse merely reared up with disconcerting agility. When it put down its front hooves, one of them trampled the overly daring adventurer to death with no mercy.

The Captain, helplessly witnessing the instant death of all his comrades, finally regained his lucidity and the awakening was brutal. His reflexes, stamina and strength being by default superior to those of his teammates, and with the support of his Paladin Spells, he had managed to narrowly avoid a hoof kick and a wing flap.

Not at all in a hurry to end him, the colossal pegasus galloped on towards the female mage brewing a huge fireball and with a snap of his jaws he chomped down on the adventurer, only her blood-dripping, severed ankles sticking to the ground.

"Raaagh!" The battle-hardened paladin finally snapped. Overcoming his compulsion to obey Ruby, he shifted his focus from the demonic beast that had just wiped out his party onto the one he believed to be the true culprit.

He expended all of his mana instantly, focusing all of his Holy Force into the arm gripping his sword, and a spiritual presence surpassing all of his previous performances seemed to amplify the size, sharpness, and sacred aura of his blade exponentially. It had taken the death of all his friends for him to transcend his limitations.

"Idiot." Ruby laconically criticized with her eyes closed as she lifted her only free hand towards him.

Her other hand was clutching a strange black medallion from which wisps of black smoke were billowing out that held a wonderful, otherworldly energy. Laudar, who should have been attacking her or thinking about the abuse he was about to inflict on her, was shaking strangely like an epileptic, his face twitching with a mixture of pain and disbelief. Clearly, he was facing something terrifying.

The Paladin Captain, who was still more than six meters away, drew back his arm to gather power, preparing to deliver a single, deadly thrust. He was still far from the ideal distance. But as he thought about the timing of his strike, his eyes widened in shock and as he looked down he saw that he was suspended several meters off the ground, impaled on an absurdly long silver scythe.

With his last bit of strength, his gaze traveled up the blade until he saw the delicate, handless arm to which it was connected. As his consciousness faded with remorse and hatred, he uttered a final, inaudible rattle,

"Truly... A... Monster."

[Chapter 673 Side Mission N°2](#)

Damn it! Damnitdamnitdamnit!" Elduin fumed out of rage and despair, tears of hatred and helplessness running down his face.

Bhammod's face was also unsightly, but he drowned his sorrow in the steel walls that prevented them from breaking out of this prison. From the moment his former comrades had followed the order of this non-human woman, he had already come to terms with the fact that they would not return alive.

Seized with an irrational vengeful zeal, the Dawn Elf suddenly aimed a shortbow he hardly ever used at the young woman, but when he saw the impaled corpse of his captain hanging in the air, he let out a heart-rending cry and gave up his revenge. Apart from dying himself, he would make the deaths of his former companions even more futile.

"Bhammod, can you handle it?" He asked listlessly in a half-hearted attempt to shake off his sadness.

The dwarf known for his shamelessness and equanimity blushed slightly as he received the expectant query from his elf friend. He hadn't made any progress at all! This wall was an enigma and he had a hunch that a thousand years of contemplating this rampart would not be enough to unlock its secrets.

He didn't want to disappoint his friend who was very close to losing it, but he had to tell him the truth.

"I can't do it. We're stuck until this Guilty guy ends the spell that created them."

"Jeez... we're screwed." Elduin mourned, looking at his two scimitars briefly before finally throwing them to the ground.

He had given up.

BANG!

While the elf had decided to wait resolutely for his demise, Ruby finally had to face the vengeful wrath of Actalaus. It had finally noticed its partner's convulsions of pain and with a galloping stride and a flapping of its wings, it parabolically crossed the air to crash into Ruby with the crushing force of a meteor.

Ruby, whose scythe arm was still embedded in the captain's torso, barely had time to morph her left arm into a silver shield and swing the adventurer's corpse away with a jerk of her right arm.

Just before impact, the freed right arm formed a thin, but very long pointed stick comparable to a high jump pole, but even longer. In terms of posture, her arm was raised in the air like a child's finger in school, but her hand had split to form this bi-directional spear piercing both the sky and the earth.

The angle was perfect. With the earth as an anchor and a perfect perpendicular placement of this spear to the giant pegasus, Ruby needed almost no physical strength to hold the spear in position.

These defensive measures were executed extraordinarily quickly, and Actalaus, crashing into Ruby, didn't know anything was wrong until he was impaled as well. The spear had pierced his chest, just below the throat, and as he threw himself down on it the penetrating force of the silver weapon was almost equal to his own kinetic energy.

The collision was brutal and a debilitating pain took his breath away. The carnivorous horse whinnied in pain, but quickly fell silent as his crushed windpipe prevented him from breathing properly. He staggered back several steps, snorting, before collapsing to the ground.

"She killed him?!" Elduin and Bhammod couldn't believe their eyes.

No, it was far too good to be true. The extra spear Ruby had created by shifting her arm was certainly sturdy and razor-sharp, its angulation flawless with the ground as support, but the winged beast's bones won out in terms of toughness.

Once the pegasus' windpipe was crushed, the tip of the spear broke against its cervical spine and the young woman was still stomped on by the two hooves of the titanic horse. The shield took the brunt of the blow, even seeming to disperse and reflect a good portion of its pent-up energy, but the resulting seismic wave still formed a crater several meters deep around her.

Neither the dwarf nor the elf noticed the energy shield forming a protective sphere around her, but when they spotted Ruby again, the first thing they noticed was that she was still unharmed. Not even the dust and sand could tarnish the freakish perfection of her immaculate face.

She was untouchable.

" My gosh... I really shouldn't have gotten up this morning." Elduin grumbled cheerlessly. This day would go down in the annals of the worst days of his existence. And coming from an elf who was almost a hundred years old, it was no small thing.

On the surface, this victory belonged to Ruby, but Actalaus' suicidal rampage had forced her to stow away her medallion. Laudar awoke just in time to witness the demise of his beloved pegasus.

"Actalaus! Goddamn it, cunt, I swear I'll make you pay for this!" The Baron poured all his hatred and repressed aggressiveness upon the young woman in a series of saucy insults that would make the most depraved rednecks blush.

His face and his gestures conveyed an unspeakable fury, but his body sent a completely different message. He was thin, dripping with sweat, girdled as if he hadn't slept in days, as well as shaking and seized by uncontrollable spasms as if he was no longer in control of his nervous system. It wasn't easy to tell from the outside, but there was not a single drop of Mana left in his body.

When Ruby had taken out her medallion, Laudar had seen and experienced something so strange and unpleasant that he didn't have the words to describe the sensation.

It was as if his entire existence was a pencil sketch on a sheet of paper and at that moment someone had tried to use an eraser to wipe it all out. His consciousness had become blurred and he felt himself sinking into an eternal coma. At the same time, a fear unlike the worst phobia had gushed forth from deep within him, providing him with the shot of determination he needed to cling to life.

Laudar had only resisted for a few seconds, but he had experienced the nightmarish sensation of drowning for ages. Like a swimmer who swallowed water, but had to keep swimming at all costs to reach the shore.

Ruby frowned when she saw that the Baron had recovered so quickly. She expected him to survive. After all, she hadn't gotten to the end of the process, but he should have at least been comatose or amnesiac. Or in any case, so weak that he would have posed no danger to her.

Instead, Laudar may have been out of Mana, but the spiritual pressure beaming out of him had nearly doubled. What he had just been through had tempered his Soul and Willpower like never before. It was almost a blessing in disguise. He had gained 2 levels, reaching level 73 and he had just acquired the Soul Skill: I Am Real.

The only Rank-S Adventurer in Lodunvals suddenly burst out laughing as he felt the changes in him. Simultaneously, his suppressed fury was completely unleashed, doubling with each chuckle, until it peaked as his face reverted to an icy, apathetic mask.

"Now please die." The Baron stated coldly.

CLANG!

A ball of light about four meters in diameter crashed hard against the illusory rampart after being struck by a cataclysmic claymore swing. Ruby had barely survived by activating her Oracle Shield.

Embedded in the wall, she hurriedly looked for a way to defeat or get rid of this annoying opponent, but her thinking was immediately interrupted by another deafening stroke.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! ...

After that, Laudar became the incarnation of the god of war himself. Dozens, hundreds of sword strikes per second rained down on Ruby's Oracle Shield and gradually the indestructible ball of energy sank into the steel wall, slowly breaking through layer after layer.

Elduin and Bhammod watched this display of raw violence with an almost numb attitude. Each impact on this energy shell was capable of obliterating a castle, but strangely the young woman inside was still unharmed. This defensive spell was beyond their comprehension and it opened their eyes to the infinite mysteries of the universe.

"Huhuuu!"

An angry neigh startled the two companions and they promptly hid behind a piece of what was left of the Guild fence. Actalaus had returned.

The giant black pegasus stood up heavily, its ribcage swelling and deflating normally again with a bellows-like sound. Not only did he have tremendous strength, but its vitality was just as terrifying.

The next second, the huge beast joined its partner in beating Ruby. Inside her protective cocoon of energy, the young woman stoically withstood the deadly impacts, but the seconds turned into minutes and a hint of panic began to rise in her heart.

'If I don't do something in 4 hours and 16 minutes I'll run out of Aether.' She calculated anxiously.

A glance at Laudar and his pegasus immersed in a destructive frenzy dashed any hope that they would grow tired and give up on their own. These two brutes would continue to strike her Oracle Shield until she died. Even if they took a break, they would not let her out of their sight and would start pummeling her again within minutes.

Ruby retrieved her black medallion with a pained grimace. She had several ways to win this battle, but each would cost her a staggering amount of Aether. The Ordeal had only just begun. If she actually chose to do this, her special artifacts would not give her any advantage for the rest of the Ordeal.

On the other hand, Laudar and Actalaus were now on guard... they would no longer be so easily tricked.

"Crap! What should I do!" Ruby roared in dilemma.

When an hour passed and Laudar and Actalaus still showed no signs of fatigue, she reluctantly decided to activate her black medallion. As she was about to activate it, Jake in the distance, who had been hiding at the edge of town to continue monitoring the situation through his Purgatory suddenly received a notification from his Oracle Device.

[Side Mission n°2: Don't let Ruby Hale die.]

[Chapter 674 Aether Overload](#)

"What the fuck?! Is this a joke?" Jake cursed as he found out about his new mission.

Of all the possible tasks, the Oracle had to specifically request him to save the one person in his immediate vicinity that he was more than happy to watch die or at least take a good beating. As for the beating... One could already say that she had paid a pretty hefty price, but did that mean that he had to save her now?

Certainly not!

"Xi, what do I risk if I ignore the mission other than a lower rating at this Ordeal." Jake asked with a reluctant expression.

[If it's not your main mission... Not much.] The Oracle AI replied succinctly. [However, as you have seen on many occasions, the Oracle System is not always impartial. If this Side Mission earned you 2000 points, would you be willing to ignore it?]

Jake began to freak out.

"Is that possible?" He worried with a surprised look.

[I don't know...] Xi admitted sheepishly.

"Damn it! Then why are you spooking me like that?" Jake snapped. "I almost had a panic attack just now!"

[Sorry, hehe.] Xi giggled mischievously, pleased with his quip.

"So! What do we do?" Jake asked again seriously.

[I was only half joking earlier. Even though 2000 points seems excessive to me, letting Ruby die could indeed incur heavy penalties depending on the importance the Oracle System places on her.]

Jake's heart sank as he noted her adamant tone.

[On the bright side...] Xi tried to lighten the mood. [At least the Oracle System called Ruby by her first name this time. It didn't have the nerve to use the term soulmate again after her betrayal last time.]

Jake snorted in contempt as he recalled the unpleasant memory.

"So, should I be grateful for its thoughtfulness?" He ironized sourly.

[No, but I'm afraid you'd better save her anyway. And then kill her after the mission is over.]

"That's the problem." Jake retorted in a bad mood. "During the previous Ordeals, the Oracle didn't always inform me clearly about the success of my missions. I didn't find out the final rating until the very end. This mission just asks me to stop her from dying. There is no time limit, no context. This looks like the kind of messed up mission I'm going to have to deal with for the entire Ordeal."

Xi said nothing this time. Regretfully, there was some truth in those words. That they would have to keep Ruby from dying all Ordeal long was more than likely.

The real concern for both of them was why such favoritism? Jake didn't believe in this soul mate crap. When he had just been granted his Oracle Device, he had fleetingly believed that it was somehow the answer to an unconscious longing for love, but he was now convinced that it was just a pretext to coerce him into bonding with the disabled young woman.

What had changed his mind was obvious: It was always his turn to sacrifice and take risks to protect Ruby and never the other way around. By robbing him, Ruby had unwittingly helped him win his Second Ordeal, but he refused to believe that it was an intentional sacrifice.

The look on her face when she had stripped him still haunted his memory. There was no doubt about it, for a brief second she had considered killing him before changing her mind. A little earlier, she had followed through with her act and had undoubtedly tried to eliminate him.

How could he knowingly protect such an unstable and psychologically ungrateful person? It was just not possible.

But he had no choice. To become stronger and have control over his life, Jake needed those Ordeal Credits.

"Hopefully saving her isn't difficult this time. I just have to wait until she runs out of Aether and at that point I'll deactivate the Purgatory Dream to allow her to escape." Jake concluded with a sly grin.

[Great plan.] Xi scoffed condescendingly. [Did you even look at how much Aether you had left to say such nonsense?]

Jake flinched at the reminder. Sustaining the Purgatory Dream in the real world was no small feat. All the illusions he created were supported mostly by the Fluid Grandmaster Core converted into an Aether Soul Core, but he still had to contribute a tremendous amount of Aether.

Summoning the Purgatory Dream in reality and creating all that lava and gigantic steel ramparts had cost him over 100B of Aether points alone. In comparison, sustaining the Purgatory activation once the illusions were set up was cheaper, but it still cost him a whopping 1B Aether points/min.

After an hour of maintaining the blockade of Lodunvals, Jake had only 200B Aether points left from the initial close to 400B. It may have seemed foolish considering he had already escaped, but for him it was also a dream opportunity to gain valuable information about the elite fighters on this planet.

Within an hour, Jake had identified at least sixteen Players, suspected twelve more, and discovered two Rank-S natives hiding in this city whose power was no less than that of Laudar. Their way of fighting was quite different and three of the sixteen Players had already lost their lives to them. The others continued to keep a low profile as they stealthily migrated to the outskirts of Lodunvals.

One of these Rank-S was a nobleman from a family competing with the Baron. He was an ordinary knight, almost frail in appearance, but each of his rapier thrusts was capable of splitting a river of lava in two.

The other Rank-S was hiding in the Cathedral consecrated to Auras and was an old woman covered in jewels and wearing a long golden toga. She was the person Jake had watched the longest, but after all this time he still hadn't managed to figure out the true nature of her powers.

Each time she clasped her hands together in a gesture of prayer, a stream of eerie energy would gush out of her and then she would start chanting as if she were possessed. When she finished her incantations, whatever illusion was in front of her would eventually disintegrate. And then Jake would be unable to conjure them up again.

What these two natives had in common was that his Oracle Device failed to scan them. Basically, the Oracle Scan was a very advanced form of mental sense, a kind of highly penetrating spiritual impulse that was very difficult to detect and intercept.

On Quanoth, the natives mainly cultivated their Spirit Bodies and Jake discovered for the first time that a powerful Soul was enough to resist an Oracle Scan. It gave him hope for the future, but it also raised new concerns.

As Jake turned his attention back to Ruby to see where she stood, he raised an eyebrow.

"She's deactivating her Oracle Shield now?! That's a lot sooner than I thought." Jake commented with a skeptical face. "Does she know I have to save her or does she have another trick up her sleeve?"

Jake was puzzled. Up until now Ruby's face had always been calm and dispassionate, but now he could clearly see the panic in it. With their crazy Agility and Perception, faking emotion was a breeze, but her Spirit Body was also showing signs of restlessness.

'She's not faking it! Fuck! I have to save her now!'

Earlier, Ruby was still wavering between continuing to wait and using her medallion. In either case, she would have wasted a huge amount of Aether, but she could afford to wait another half hour before reaching the point of no return.

Except that only two minutes had passed when her Oracle Shield deactivated itself.

[Warning! The liquid alloy has gone into Aetheric overload. Shutdown of the Oracle Device to prevent its destabilization. Oracle Device restart in 120 seconds.]

Ruby was the first to gasp. She had never resorted to using her Oracle Shield for more than a few seconds before. How could she have imagined that something like this would happen. But when she thought about it more seriously, it actually made perfect sense.

With her lvl 2 Oracle Shield, 200M Aether points were being spent every 10 seconds and that Aether had to go somewhere. The Oracle Shield's indestructibility had already proven in the past that when the enemy was too strong the Oracle System could fill in the missing Aether with a cosmic wifi like method of transmitting Aether over distance.

Whether it was Jake or her, they never imagined for a second that the limit would come not from the Aether, but from the metal in the bracelet! After billions of units of Aether had passed through it over a long period of time, its atomic structure had finally been affected and was showing clear signs of overheating.

It wasn't obvious, but Ruby could feel her body tingling as if liquid lead had been injected into her veins and brain. Her Oracle AI was no longer responding either. Her Oracle Device had indeed been deactivated for safety.

As the ghastly truth dawned on her, the young woman's face became bloodless and she exchanged places with one of the adventurers' corpses that Actalaus had already crushed. She reappeared a few dozen meters behind them and Laudar's heavy claymore obliterated the former captain of the adventuring group.

Elduin and Bhammod, who was still hiding nearby, roared silently in rage, but there was nothing they could do to avenge their comrade. He was already dead pointlessly and now even his remains had been desecrated...

"Kill this bitch!" they screamed mentally, suddenly taking the side of Laudar and his pegasus.

[Chapter 675 Why Are You Staring At Me Like That?](#)

Laudar showed his mettle at that moment, for when he saw that his claymore had missed its target, he did not complain nor did he flinch. He nodded to Actalaus and with an unspoken agreement, the two partners turned around and separated.

Laudar dashed at Ruby with lightning speed, his claymore dragging on the ground behind him, spraying out sparks. As for his black pegasus, it went into a murderous or rather destructive rampage and began to trample to oblivion all the adventurers lying on the ground, whether they were already dead or just passed out.

Elduin and Bhammod shuddered in horror as they witnessed the carnage, but apart from hiding behind their bit of fence there was not much they could do. As long as these walls existed they would be stuck here with these three psychopaths.

"If I survive this mess, I swear I'll stop drinking." The dwarf whispered as he glanced tearfully at his latest empty pint.

"And me to stop snubbing the people around me." The elf snickered in a sullen voice.

"Hahaha... So we're well and truly screwed." Bhammod suddenly laughed out loud before suddenly choking on his saliva as he saw a gigantic black mass galloping ferociously towards them. "CRAP! That bastard horse is coming towards us! Run!"

CLANG!

At that moment, a deafening crash reached them and while fleeing the two adventurers were able to see from the corner of their eyes the young woman they hated with all their heart being blasted into the air, then violently smashing into the dome-shaped steel ceiling.

Laudar was clutching his claymore with both hands, his posture identical to that of a batter after a successful home run. He frowned with displeasure when he saw that she had not been instantly blown to bits. Just before impact, she had summoned a thick, round, military-grade shield and it had taken the brunt of the damage in her stead.

Embedded in the ceiling, leaving an indentation only a few inches deep, Ruby discarded her now unusable shield, revealing a pulverized arm. The bones inside had been crushed and several open fractures had made the whole thing hideously bloody.

A normal human would have been condemned to severe damage even if her arm was treated in time, but Ruby simply pressed the bones protruding out of her skin back into place, then using her innate limb transformation ability, which she owed to her Digestor half, she restored her arm to its original appearance.

Her face hollowed out slightly as she performed this magic trick, but a bluish halo suddenly exuded forth from her body and the temperature of the air and any object within tens of meters skyrocketed as their "coldness" converged on Ruby.

This icy energy, absurd as it may be, immediately restored her color and second after second she began to recover her strength. Laudar hadn't missed anything, but the burning field around Ruby had taken him by surprise.

No sooner had he stepped into that lethal zone than his leg began to sizzle like a steak on a barbecue. It wasn't just the contact with the hot air, but the atoms in his entire leg heating up without his consent. The blood in his leg began to boil, his muscles rapidly transitioned from solid to liquid to gas, causing inconceivable damage.

When the Baron pulled his leg out of the scorching no-man's land, his leg looked like a hideous, charred mess, as if someone had pulled the pin out of a grenade and thrown it into his boot.

"RRRRRAAAAAAH!" Even a warrior as hardened as Laudar could not bear such pain.

His Soul and Spirit Body were consumed by this mixture of pain and fury and when he raised his claymore above his head this time, a hundred times larger mirage of his blade formed above him, his killing intent so overwhelming that a faint of heart would have perished instantly.

The oxygen molecules that brushed against this mirage broke apart on contact, as if minced by an infinitely sharp energy. Even Ruby's burning domain disintegrated as it touched this impalpable energy.

In a wuxia novel, this energy might have been called Sword Qi, but in the Mirror Universe it was simply a physical manifestation of his willpower. No two were alike. His emotions, his Soul Class, his high Spirit Body Level and his own will had given birth to this unfathomable energy that no physical laws could clearly explain.

This was Laudar's True Will. The Baron existed only to kill and most of his crimes had been perpetrated with this claymore.

"DIE!" He shrieked as he brought his blade down with all his might.

Ruby, who had just about recovered from the previous strike, erected multiple walls of ice this time, using her Aether Core to the extreme, but how could these rickety walls condensed from the heated air around them withstand such a devastating force.

The ice walls shattered like thin glass being run over by a steamroller. Ruby tried to manipulate the surrounding metal, cooled lava, and even the Guild's crumbling ruins with telekinesis to build more defenses, but she found that nothing worked. In the Purgatory Dream, Jake controlled absolutely everything.

Finally infuriated and desperate, she scanned the area with her mental sense for someone to trade places with and ecstatically detected the two surviving adventurers, only to be quickly disappointed.

Bhammod and Elduin already had their backs to the wall with nowhere else to run and Actalaus had already reared up, ready to slam his hooves down with all his weight to stomp them to pieces. If she decided to teleport and switch places with them, she'd be trampled to death in a heartbeat.

"Jake, I'll remember this!" She huffed as she imagined the smirk that bastard must have been wearing at that moment.

When that bastard finally made up his mind to exact revenge, he didn't do things by halves!

'As spiteful as I am and he's not even a Digestor.' She chuckled bitterly before gripping her black medallion again and infusing it with billions of Aether points.

'This time it's going to cost me all my Aether.' She sighed with a lump in her throat.

Since her Oracle Device had overloaded, not even 0.6 seconds had passed and yet she was already out of breath and at the end of her rope. That was the problem with fights between high-level opponents. Their stamina may have been exceptional, but the sheer intensity of the exchanges was such that only a few seconds were enough to exhaust them. With a respite of a few seconds, they could quickly recover their strength, but only if their enemies gave them the opportunity...

The gigantic claymore was nearly upon her already and the air pressure produced by the sword had already squeezed her skin to the point of forming tiny beads of silver blood on its surface. As soon as she revealed her medallion, the speed of the huge blade instantly tripled.

How could a veteran warrior like Laudar, who had almost lost his life because of this medallion, underestimate her again. He had intentionally held back his strength to make her hesitate, and it was only when the medallion showed up again that he decided to strike with all his might.

This medallion was an overpowered Aether Artifact, but the world was fair and its activation conditions were relatively strict. On top of that, unlike Jake, Ruby hadn't yet managed to get herself accepted by the Artifact. She had to activate it manually every time she wanted to use it, as if she was asking for permission before using it.

Faced with this unexpected burst of speed, Ruby turned pale and hastily put her medallion away before summoning her Advanced Aether Artifact Sniper to use as a shield. It was the sturdiest object in her possession besides the medallion itself, but the medallion was not adequate against such a large attack.

'Myrgenian Trance! Telekinesis! Diaphanous State! Dream Ignition!'

She activated three Bloodline Skills and a Soul Glyph consecutively in a split second to boost her defensive abilities. Her body became translucent, as if light was streaming through it, and an invisible energy spread around her even faster than the claymore until it reached Laudar, who suddenly nodded off before abruptly reopening his bloodshot eyes and snarling contemptuously.

"A sleeping spell against a Rank-S adventurer? You're daydreaming!" The Baron spat out disparagingly as he continued his attack. His claymore had barely slowed for a microsecond before picking up speed again.

In a flash, the claymore crossed the rest of the distance and Ruby reflexively closed her eyes, accepting her fate. She still had a card to play, but even if she survived, she would be left with severe injuries.

She waited resolutely for the fateful impact, but it never came. A few seconds later, when she opened her eyes again, she was wrapped in a steel cocoon, her senses completely cut off from the outside world.

The metal enveloping her began to wiggle and in shock, she was propelled by the metal with each contraction before emerging again into an alleyway of Lodunvals half a minute later. Not far from her, Elduin and Bhammod were crouched on the ground with an equally incredulous expression.

Suddenly, a shadow flew over them, blocking out the sunlight, and looking up they recognized a giant handsome man streaked with veins of lava from whom an impressive heroic aura radiated. The three survivors recognized him at once, but their reaction was very different from each other.

"Uh, thanks, sir." Bhammod thanked him with a watery look as he uncorked a bottle of beer out of nowhere.

"Didn't you say you'd stop drinking if you survived?" Elduin nudged him quietly in a whisper. To Jake, he added, "Anyway, thanks for the help, but I don't like you for it. My friends are dead because of you two."

It was said. As for Ruby, she spat blood as soon as she recognized her savior. How could she not realize that he had been around all along, watching them struggle without moving a finger until the last moment.

"You... Bastard, I swear I'm going to kill you as soon as I get better." She made a series of insubstantial threats and while Jake was being insulted he suddenly started to laugh, which shut her up.

[Side Mission n°2 accomplished. Perfect Rating.]

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Ruby suddenly got a bad feeling.

[Chapter 676 First Hug](#)

"No nothing. Just a sudden urge to give you a taste of your own medicine." Jake smiled ominously.

"You've wasted a lot of Aether and your mind is exhausted from all those big techniques. Isn't this a great opportunity for me?"

Elduin and Bhammod obviously couldn't understand what event Jake was referring to. After all, hadn't he just saved her? What would be the point of going after her now? This Guilty didn't seem like the perverted type, so what did he really want.

Ruby, by contrast, reacted in a very different way. She squinted warily, then pulled out her sniper, which she reflexively aimed at Jake.

"Don't move or I'll shoot." She declared slowly.

"Go ahead, please." Jake sneered as he rolled his eyes and spread his arms as if inviting her to take aim at his heart.

Ruby suddenly felt ridiculous and the pressure of her finger on the trigger slackened imperceptibly. The next second, a violent uppercut struck her in the solar plexus, jarring her feet off the ground, but Jake held her back with his other arm to keep her from flying off into orbit.

"Cough! Cough!" Ruby, felt her precious sniper being snatched from her hands and before she could protest, a second uppercut rocked her on the chin, rattling her brain all over the place.

Mercilessly, Jake followed up with another hundred uppercuts, this time with the support of his telekinesis and precise Aether control. Hold after hold, he then dislocated each joint, first the legs, then the arms with surgical precision. Elduin and Bhammod watched the scene with fear-stricken faces.

Ironically, Ruby didn't really try to fight back. If she wanted to, she could still stand up and fight, but she knew it would be an uphill battle that would probably cost her all the Aether she had left. But somewhere deep down she knew she deserved it. She just stared at him with a bright silver gleam in her eyes.

After a moment, Jake stopped beating her and inspected his handiwork with a satisfied look. Because Ruby had been wearing ordinary native clothes before she reverted to her current appearance, those clothes had ripped and she was practically naked. If she hadn't covered her body in silver chitin, it would have been a rather lewd sight.

"Don't give me that look." He justified himself cheerfully as he saw her glaring daggers at him, "The day you stole my Soul Stones leaving me for dead I was in a much worse state than you are right now. With your Vitality, you can recover from those injuries in a few hours if you really try. As for your arms and legs... As a half Digestor you can change their configuration to your liking."

'So he knows.' Ruby realized, her heart sinking in her chest though she didn't understand why.

"I'm not complaining." She snorted then. The pain was already gone. "You've already stolen something precious from me. Aren't you satisfied?"

"This?" Jake said as he held up her sniper. Then he let out a chilling laugh. "I'm far from satisfied. My motto is to return ten times every blow I take. I take no pleasure in beating a woman, but I can certainly rob you a bit more."

Ruby scoffed defiantly.

"So what? You're going to steal my clothes? Not that I have much left. Everything else is in my Oracle Device."

"Bingo!" Jake winked at her, casting an insistent gaze at her wrist.

A glimmer of understanding suddenly struck the young woman.

"Are you trying to steal my liquid alloy?"

She had almost 8 tons of it from slaughtering other Players, and 6 were in the Space Storage of her bracelet. The rest was well and truly distributed throughout her body.

"What makes you think that's my intention?" Jake watched her curiously, tilting his head as if he were dealing with an idiot. "As tempting as stealing your alloy liquid is, there's something else far more useful I can steal from a treacherous backstabber like you."

Ruby's eyes widened abruptly as she realized his true intent. She looked vulnerable and helpless and suddenly jumped to her feet, her bones snapping back into place with bloodcurdling sounds.

Her pupils flashed an intense bluish radiance and Jake felt himself nod off like Laudar earlier. Unlike the Baron, his Spirit Body was considerably lower in level, but unlike the Baron, thanks to his Myrtharian Bloodline lvl 3, his Soul and Spirit Body were 12 times more powerful than those of another Evolver of the same level.

And most importantly, he was equipped to deal with this type of threat. With a gun, even a weakling could defeat the world champion weightlifter if the latter fought barehanded.

He activated Bloodline Ignition in response, which could be compared to an ultimate shot of adrenaline and testosterone, and then activated the Soul Spells he had learned from Xion's Soul Stone to resist this influence.

The Dream Glyph was immediately shattered and reality reappeared before him. The problem was that Ruby had crossed the entire distance between them in that brief moment and she rammed him headfirst into a tight embrace.

With their different stats and sizes, Jake was obviously stronger. Planting his back leg in the ground, he slid only a few feet before stabilizing, but getting out of Ruby's embrace wasn't as easy.

Her arms had been turned into harpoons and she had rooted them deep into his flesh. Jake glared at her indifferently and decisively chose to rip her arms off to get free.

Yet, at the very moment the intention crossed his mind, Jake felt a torrent of hellish heat surge from every cell in his body. With a snap of his fingers, his body temperature, already much higher than normal, went from several hundred degrees Celsius to more than a thousand, and it was still rising.

Concomitantly, he saw while staring down an icy and undefinable substance being furiously drained from his body, then being voraciously absorbed by Ruby. The young woman's body became more and more glacial and he felt the strength of her embrace increasing rapidly.

'She steals my cold?' Jake wondered not hiding his perplexity.

He wasn't that upset after watching her fight against Laudar, but it was different to experience it first hand.

Jake's powers, incredible as they were, could still be explained rationally. Creating heat required energy. As the particles gained energy, they became more and more agitated, increasing their collision frequency until they eventually produced light, or radioactivity. When an object had no energy at all, it was absolute zero.

By this logic, the notion of cold energy should simply not exist.

In comparison, Ruby's powers were an enigma. He had always believed that the Throsgenians were the counterparts of the Kintharians. If the Kintharians lived on Mercury, the Throsgenians lived on Pluto. His reasoning was just that simple.

Well, apparently it was more complicated than that. Ruby was able to flip the physics on its head by deriving energy from something that had none. By stealing this "negative energy" from him, which shouldn't exist, the brake preventing his temperature from skyrocketing had been removed and as she stole his cold, his body became hotter and hotter at an alarming rate.

"What a shame." Jake said as he stroked the young woman's silver hair with a feigned display of pity. "I am your nemesis."

Ruby could also sense that something was wrong. The more she stole his cold, the stronger she became and the hotter his body became. Laudar had almost died because of it, but instead of getting weaker, why did Jake's aura seem to be getting more and more terrifying to her.

At some point, Ruby gritted her teeth as she roared,

"I refuse to believe that your body doesn't have a limit. If your body gets too hot, you'll end up burning like everyone else."

"You're right." Jake calmly acknowledged, his body blinding like a sun. "But, can you handle all that cold without freezing? Besides, the hotter my body is, the harder it is for you to get cold out of it, right?"

Ruby crumpled in fright at these foreboding words. If one was doped by cold and the other by heat, then the final victory would be decided by whoever had the better Constitution and Vitality.

As a Digestor, her Vitality had always been her strong point, but just by looking at this man she could feel that his physique was outperforming hers in every way and this scorching heat had no effect on him. Worse, blisters were beginning to form on her skin from the increasing radiation he was emitting.

On the other hand, Ruby had to convert this cold into energy for her body. Even if she wanted to, she couldn't cool herself beyond absolute zero. Even if she could, it would mean cryogenically freezing herself to death. Throsgenians were adapted to the cold, but they were still flesh and blood beings first and foremost.

This also posed another issue. Namely, the limitation of the environment. To stimulate his Bloodline, Jake could easily increase the temperature of his surroundings, or find an exploitable heat source like a campfire or oven. He even had his Aether Sun Core just in case.

Ruby, on the other hand, had more limited options. She was already training in liquid nitrogen, but it was hard to find colder stuff naturally, and all the Ordeals took place on worlds with warmer temperatures. To harvest cold, she had to actively steal it from her environment and that took extra effort. An item like an Aether Cold Sun Core was obviously much more complicated to obtain.

The direct consequence of this inconvenience was that her Myrghenian Bloodline had only gone up to lvl 3 two months ago while her Body Stats didn't even come close.

So, without any suspense, two minutes later, a half-frozen Ruby collapsed helplessly into the arms of a supernova-like Jake.

[Chapter 677 In The Palm Of His Hand](#)

Ruby collapsed like an ice cube to the ground with a loud clang, while Jake remained stoic in the same invincible and stalwart posture. The blinding light gushing from his entire being dimmed rapidly, its scorching temperature returning to an acceptable level in a scant few seconds.

His cells greedily absorbed the excess heat and radiation and quickly returned to near normalcy, but on a microscopic scale they had tripled in size and looked like they were about to explode after being stretched to the limit.

Jake frowned as he achieved his victory. Strangely, he didn't get the expected thrill and gratification out of it. Did this mean they were even and he was giving up his revenge?

Not quite.

Ruby's last burst of fierce resistance had postponed the inevitable, but his plan remained the same.

'She won't stay unconscious long.' He refocused his mind on his goal.

At their level, their vitality was formidable. Once her body temperature normalized, her brain would turn itself back on. It was a different matter for her mind, worn out by all those Aether and Soul Spells, but Ruby had not yet reached her psychic limits. This loss of consciousness was strictly physiological.

At the same time, the two adventurers Jake had rescued along with Ruby were now covered in purulent blisters and frostbite. They needed medical attention immediately and were only able to stand because of the Digitization, their powerful Souls and the potion they had downed.

Elduin and Bhammod, who had scrambled more than a hundred meters away and hid behind a nearby shop to survive their clash, could barely open their eyes, but they did open them just in time to see Jake reach for the unconscious woman's wrist.

Indeed! There was only one thing more precious than an Aether Artifact or liquid alloy that Jake could wrest from Ruby. And that thing was her freedom.

Jake wasn't a big fan of Slave Contracts, but how could he willingly obey the Oracle System and save the life of someone who had betrayed him in the past and even tried to kill him on several occasions?

If the Oracle System could give him such a mission once, then it could happen twice, and then a third time, until one day Jake would be knifed in the back by the same ungrateful person he had worked so hard to save. As open-minded and forbearing as Jake could be, he wasn't a sucker for anyone to sacrifice at will.

'Fine. You want me to save her? No sweat. Want me to be her bodyguard or her soul mate? No problem. But I need a guarantee.'

That was roughly the line of thought that was running through Jake's mind at that very moment. His arm flashed at prodigious speed towards the wrist of the oblivious young woman, counting on exploiting this narrow window to force her to sign a Slave Contract against her will.

He had acted with decisiveness and nerve, his arm even generating a supersonic bang as it stretched out, but just as their wrists were about to make contact, an energy barrier came between them.

CLANG!

The pure white energy film enveloping Ruby grew brighter as Jake tried to shatter it with more strength. As he pressed on, Jake suddenly felt a painful tingling in his fingers, then a sharp pain, and he was forced to pull his arm back.

"An Oracle Shield? That must be her Oracle AI that took over." Jake understood at once.

He'd seen her use it extensively against Laudar, so he wasn't surprised.

"You shouldn't have much Aether left after this fight though." Jake smirked derisively.

'Oracle Shield, activate.' Jake ordered with no hesitation.

His wrist tried to reach out to Ruby's again and a bright energy film also began to glow strongly as it clashed against the young woman's identical one. Feeling no pain or tingling this time, Jake pushed hard with his arm to bridge the remaining millimeters of distance.

His wrist progressed extremely slowly, but the radiance generated by the clash of the two Oracle Shields escalated until it was as dazzling as Jake had been a few seconds earlier. At that moment, Jake's arm became unable to move any closer.

'This isn't working.' Jake quickly observed.

The two Oracle Shields were living up to their reputation of indestructibility. He had hoped that with equal weapons, his physical strength would have allowed him to prevail, but that was not the case. The more force he put into it, the more the Oracle Shield responded by raising its energy levels.

'Now I just have to wait for one of us to run out of Aether, but I can't afford to wait.' Jake deduced solemnly. Turning to the two surviving adventurers, he said bluntly, "I'm leaving. Do you want to stay here or come with me?"

As he made this offer, he used a Soul Spell in an attempt at weakening Ruby's unconscious mind and preventing her from regaining consciousness, but the Oracle Shield did its job by blocking even his spiritual fluctuations.

'How troublesome...' Jake complained with a terribly frustrated grimace.

Suddenly, he turned his head toward the hyper-resistant steel dome a few meters behind him confining Laudar and his pegasus, before abruptly turning his head again toward the southwestern gate of Lodunvals.

'This sucks. An alien army armed to the teeth is marching straight towards Lodunvals from the south, and Laudar has already destroyed half of the ramparts I erected to confine him.'

Jake had stopped fueling the illusions with his Aether and they were no longer repairing themselves.

Giving up on the idea of recruiting the two adventurers, Jake grabbed Ruby by the scruff of the neck like a recalcitrant puppy, then proclaimed without looking back,

"I'm leaving."

Elduin and Bhammod exchanged a look, taken aback by his change of behavior, but after a heavy nod of understanding they yelled,

"Wait for us, we're coming with you!"

Without answering, Jake took off into the air and with an absent-minded wave of his hand he encompassed the two adventurers with his telekinesis, sweeping them into the sky with him. The sound barrier was broken in the blink of an eye and he reached the location where Trash and Jeanie were anxiously awaiting him.

With his telekinesis, he picked them up and flew like a shooting star to the northwest, fading into the clouds in the direction of Laudarkvik.

Thousands of meters up, the illusions created by his Purgatory Dream dissipated in one fell swoop as Jake and his Artifact moved out of range and Laudar's furious roar shook the entire city.

"You two, I will find you! Meanwhile, wash your neck for me!"

Jake and the rest of his group, who were rocketing along at a speed well beyond the speed of sound, never heard his threat, but they did get a glimpse of the huge alien army covering the plain southwest of Lodunvals. At a glance, he reckoned at least a hundred thousand.

These aliens were no strangers to him. During his second Ordeal, he had already encountered this humanoid species: The Wengols.

The Wengols, back then, were aliens three to four meters tall with two pairs of arms and a mushroom-shaped skull. Their skin was red-brown and looked slimy and soft like that of an octopus. Their technology was quite advanced, and they had a constitution and intelligence far superior to that of humans.

A scan revealed to him the presence of several Players hidden in the middle of this huge army, but it didn't concern him anymore. He didn't know if the mess he and Ruby had made in Lodunvals had triggered this invasion or if it was just a coincidence, but it didn't matter.

If Jake had to speculate, he would say that the Oracle had sent them here just as this alien invasion was about to begin to add a little spice to their ordeal. A day too late, if he had chosen to take it easy and enjoy the city's attractions, and he would have been faced with a siege.

Several Wengols emitting terrifying spiritual auras raised their eyes to stare coldly at them, but none of them went after them. Elduin and Bhammod, who had never flown, especially not that high, were aghast when they saw this huge army.

"My-my family!" Bhammod stammered in despair.

Jake refused to slow down but assured him that all the civilians had been teleported north of Lodunvals and that he had not injured any guards. Aside from a few adventurers and a handful of knight-mages, the military forces of Lodunvals were virtually unscathed.

A holographic view of the approaching army had also been broadcast by his Purgatory just before it was disabled. As long as the city's military was doing its duty, ensuring the evacuation of civilians shouldn't be too complicated. This was his last gesture of selflessness for a city that had tried to kill him within a day.

What Jake didn't mention was that the chances of survival for these soldiers would be extremely pessimistic. Their numbers were not even a tenth of the Wengol army and their standard was undoubtedly lower.

The dwarf was not really pacified, but he settled down after drinking a flask of rum. Northeast of Lodunvals was the province of Kelenden, the second most heavily fortified province in the empire after the capital. If the civilians could find refuge there, they would be safe for a while.

Seconds after they left, Jake felt Ruby squirm on his shoulder and he tightened his grip. Ruby's claws and harpooned limbs tried to skewer his torso again, but against his Oracle Shield she was completely helpless.

She tried to struggle out of his grip, but soon realized that her physical strength was no match for his.

Minute by minute, Jake swallowed the kilometers and Ruby kept burning her Aether to power her Oracle Shield. As a dark and chaotic city straight out of a steampunk fantasy loomed on the horizon, Ruby's Oracle Shield went out, not because of an overload, but because she had finally run out of Aether.

Her fate was now in the palm of his hand.

[Chapter 678 Your Will Is Mine](#)

"Wait-wait a minute! You're going to Laudarkvik?!" Elduin spluttered as he spotted the gloomy city in the distance. He was so shocked that he forgot about his airsickness and the freezing high altitude wind chilling his bones.

There was plenty to be uneasy about. Jake had never seen such a baleful city.

To begin with, Laudarkvik was brightly lit only one or two hours a day. The rest of the time, the thick layer of black clouds shrouding the entire southern part of the Empire plunged the city and its countryside into total darkness. Flying from Lodunvals to Laudarkvik had taken him through such a pitch black region and without an outstanding visual acuity it was undeniably terrifying.

This was not to say that the city was very well lit during the scarce periods of daylight. The sunlight shedding on Laudarkvik was rather weak, like a winter's day in the late afternoon.

Luckily for them, it was almost noon and this was the time when Laudarkvik was "sunny". This made Jake realize that he was probably admiring the city in its best light...

Instead of answering the elf, Jake decelerated to land in a clearing not far from the city and unceremoniously dropped Ruby to the ground like a slightly too heavy sack of flour.

"It's time to end this." Jake sighed.

Connecting his wrist to her wrist, he immediately received the following notification:

[Oracle Rank identical, establishment of a Slave Contract impossible.]

Jake was a little confused, but he had anticipated this possibility. That's why he didn't hesitate to make her waste all her Aether. The price had been exorbitant for him too, but it was either that or kill her on the spot. And he was pretty sure the Oracle would stop him by interfering with one of its bullshit missions.

'Oracle Promotion, activate.' Jake replied calmly.

His First Lieutenant's authority level was immediately elevated by two ranks, to that of Major. Ruby had depleted all her Aether, so her Oracle AI could not even stand up for her, even if she had a matching skill.

Technically, however, he still needed her consent. With Ruby passed out, she was unfortunately not in a position to assert her rights. When Jake used a Soul Spell this time to break her mind and make her give in, her resistance was much weaker than his previous mental intrusion.

Yet, he was quickly caught off guard as he realized that even in the midst of a nightmare that tortured her endlessly, Ruby was still Ruby. Absolutely unfazed, as if she felt no pain.

"That Dream Glyph is such a pain in the ass." Jake grumbled as he ramped up the pressure.

Jake had already glanced at Ruby's Oracle Status during this time and her current Bloodline was a Grade 9 hybrid Bloodline named Myrghenian Dreamlight Alfion. Neither Xi nor the Oracle System had any information on it, but based on the previous abilities demonstrated, they could make some guesses.

What was certain was that the Dream in "Dreamlight" and the "ion" in "Alfion" referred to the Dream Zhorions. It wasn't a glyph alone that gave her hypnosis and illusion abilities, but a full-blown bloodline. And that was far more troublesome.

Ruby was also part Eltarian, which meant that her mind had the same potential as his. Combined with her Dream Zhorion Bloodline traits, psychological torture through an illusion or dream was almost ineffective. In her dreams, she had control over everything and could define what was fake or real and deliberately choose to feel nothing.

In other words, Soul Spells aimed at manipulating her mental space were virtually ineffective. That didn't mean it was impossible, but it was like a human trying to outdo a lion's claws using his own fingernails. The gap was almost insurmountable at equivalent spirit.

But more importantly, unlike Shaktilar, Jake quickly realized that Ruby was much tougher. After all, she had survived to the very end of her Second Ordeal, undergone a military education, and put up with a severe handicap for most of her life.

Lastly, she was also a Digestor. Jake didn't know how much of this part influenced her, but he'd never seen one of these monsters writhing in pain. Some of them would cackle or shriek when sliced, but it was hard to tell if it was out of pain or anger.

Meanwhile, Elduin, Bhammod, Jeanie, and Trash were sitting on a rock, watching him with growing restlessness. Since he had crouched down to feel Ruby's wrist, he had not changed his position as if he were sleeping. Except that his eyes were wide open, which was downright creepy.

"What's he doing?" Elduin whispered as he turned to the fairy and the boy.

Trash shrugged, while the Minmin scratched her head for a long time before answering adorably,

"I don't know."

Time passed and then, suddenly, a few minutes later Jake began to move again. He was in a bad mood, but he hadn't said his last word yet.

"All right. You're more persistent than I thought." Jake reluctantly conceded. Without her implicit or explicit agreement he would get nowhere.

'Xi, any ideas?'

[Try a Rune. I don't have any better ideas.] She tentatively advised.

Jake's face lit up at the suggestion. This could work!

Without the least bit of respect, Jake flipped Ruby over like a pancake and placed her flat on her stomach, revealing her smooth, metallic back. The skin was protected by a thin plate of silver chitin, but Jake got rid of it by pulling hard as if to open a mussel.

Then brandishing the red-hot claw of his index finger he began to carve several words into her flesh. The skin underneath was immaculate and smooth like that of an everyday beauty, but the blood that spilled as he cut into her sizzling flesh was silver like that of a Digestor.

Jake noticed at that moment that her Digestor condition did not appear in her Bloodlines list. There was no indication that she was any different from them. He didn't know if it was to protect her or if the Oracle System was really malfunctioning and blind to anything concerning these creatures.

As he carved these words, Jake activated his Word of Power Magic and focused hard to pour all of his willpower and intent into those bloody engravings. As he withdrew his claw, a mysterious and cryptic energy spread through Ruby's body, affecting her deeply without her being able to react.

"I am Jake's slave and his will is mine."

That was what he had carved onto her back. As much as he wished he could have enjoyed his handiwork longer, he knew those runes wouldn't last long. Within seconds or minutes, her back would have fully regenerated, erasing his runes in the process.

Jake once again joined his wrist to the young woman's and this time the operation went off without a hitch. A grimace of agony passed fleetingly over Ruby's sleeping face, which surprised him greatly, but after a few seconds he received the notification of success as expected.

[Slave Contract successfully established, Ruby Hale is now your slave.]

He took no pride in this, but it was inevitable. If she behaved herself, he didn't mind terminating the contract at the end of the Ordeal, but as long as she was by his side it was a necessary precaution.

Not to mention the fact that he also had some reservations. Her pained grimace and the slight delay while the contract was being set up had put him on his guard.

'Xi, does the Slave Contract work on her Digestor part?' he inquired vigilantly.

[No Oracle Contract has ever been established with a Digestor.] The Oracle AI confirmed his fears. [If the Slave Contract worked, assume that only the human is loyal to you. Still, the human and Digestor are one soul and they theoretically affect each other. I don't know how this will play out in practice, so stay alert.]

Jake pondered the ramifications of this caveat for a long time, but eventually concluded that there was no point in worrying about it. They would deal with these troubles when they arose.

At last turning to Elduin and the others who were looking at him like some kind of freak, he ordered,

"Tell me everything you know about Laudarkvik."

The elf's face broke down as he received this instruction.

"So we are going to Laudarkvik..." He grumbled with the devastated countenance of a criminal marching to the scaffold.

Jake ignored the elf's laments and waited for an intelligible answer from Bhammod or Jeanie. He had long since given up questioning Trash, who was aptly named.

Jeanie knew a lot about this infamous city, but had never been there. Laudarkvik wasn't safe enough for a Minmin, and she wouldn't have survived more than two minutes there. Bhammod, on the other hand, had already been there several times on escort missions.

Thoughtfully smoothing his long red beard soaked with beer, the dwarf said,

"Laudarkvik is difficult to define in a few words. For many, it is the landfill, the disgrace, the darkness of the empire. The Empire's law has no hold there and all criminals, renegades and non-humans rejected by society or prosecuted by the law have taken up residence there. But if you ask the Laudarkvikians, this city is the second capital of Ret'Asi because they consider their impunity to be proof of a parallel empire. The rest of the Empire, including Lodunvals and its surroundings are called there the Day Ret'Asi, while they claim to be the Night Ret'Asi.

"Beyond that, Laudarkvik is an independent city controlling half of the Icarden province. It is co-ruled by nine factions, eight of which are formally condemned and persecuted by the empire's forces. These eight factions are the Vampires, Were-beings, Metamorphs, Dark Races, Demons, Undeads, Astral and Mutants. The ninth faction is simply the humans, mostly bad guys, who have fled the empire."

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This overview matched what Jeanie and Trash had pretty much alluded to, but Jake was still troubled when he learned of all these factions. None of these races looked ordinary and if at least one of these Vampires was like Wyatt, then the other races couldn't be much weaker to stand up to them.

Jake had personally dealt with Vampires and Were-beings, but his cousin Kevin wasn't necessarily indicative of that human subspecies. If these Demons were like Hecate, who was strongly suspected of being an Archdemon, then he had to assume the worst about the Demon Faction.

'This city is undoubtedly ten times more dangerous than Lodunvals.' Jake acknowledged inwardly. 'But, it's the perfect playground for me.'

A city with no clear leader, forming an independent pseudo-state within the empire itself and co-ruled by races hostile to each other. It was the perfect place to establish one's own faction and recruit. However, before he could take action he needed to understand exactly what and who he would be dealing with.

"Bhammod, what do you know about these nine factions." Jake began his questioning. "Who are their leaders? What are their capabilities, their military forces and their aspirations? Are there any individuals I should be wary of?"

"Everyone in Laudarkvik is to be distrusted." The dwarf spat bitterly. "There is not a single good egg in this town. Almost every child seven years old or older has probably killed at least once to survive. You'll understand when we get there..."

Jake could think of several reasons, but it was still worse than he expected. If this city was this lawless and anarchic, it might take a little work to get some respect.

"What about my other questions?" He urged Bhammod, who looked afflicted by the traumatic memories he had of this city.

Caught by Jake, the dwarf remained confused for a few seconds, then with a sigh, he reported extensively,

"I don't know much about these nine factions, since I've always stuck to my duty to protect my clients. I never strayed from them. What I do know, I learned by chance and it is mainly with the ninth faction, composed of criminals, convicts and human merchants.

"About this particular faction, I know a few people. They're not all serial killers, thieves or rapists. There are also good people who have killed or damaged the reputation of corrupt nobles, or they are unwelcome personalities that the empire sought to eradicate. One of them leading this faction at the moment would be one of the bastard princes who is supposed to be dead. Prince Edric. He is a Half-Elf and it was his father who stationed him here with some guards to protect him. There's also the dwarf Gimdli, who deals in slaves, treasures and stolen goods; as well as the High Human Abbikesh, an illustrious general who allegedly cuckolded the emperor for years by banging his first queen before getting caught."

"A High Human?" Jake perked up with a jolt of interest.

Elduin and Bhammod were momentarily flummoxed by his genuine ignorance, but remembering that he and the other crazy woman were Guilties they found it appropriate.

"A High Human is a human like any other, but with skills, talent, and potential far beyond that of ordinary humans. Their souls are strong from birth and they have more HP than other humans. This is one of the prerequisites for obtaining certain Soul-Classes and they almost all have the prefix 'Elite' in their status. They are quite rare, but one is born every now and then. Roughly one out of a million. Laudar, the Baron with the giant pegasus you battled is a High Human.

"I see." Jake was more interested in that 'Elite' prefix. If the difference was akin to monsters spawned by a Dungeon Digestor, then he absolutely had to get that prefix, which he envisioned as a kind of slightly special Soul Glyph.

"What else?" Jake invited him to continue.

"Not much." Bhammod shook his head apologetically. "What I know about the other factions are generalities that any citizen of Laudarkvik can tell you. Laudarkvik has a high council from which it co-runs its half province. Each faction has between one and three seats on this council depending on their respective strengths. These seats are held by Laudarkvikians who are considered to be among the strongest of their respective races, who are also often the heads of their own clans.

"Vampires, Were-beings and Demons have three seats each. The Metamorphs, Undeads and Dark Races have two, while the Astral, Mutants and Humans have only one. General Abbikesh occupies the seat allocated to humans at the moment.

"Concerning the Vampires, I've regrettably had to deal with the Thrajah clan during a mission that went haywire, so I know a bit more about them... The Vampires are divided into multiple clans, each with a Progenitor, or at least a very old Vampire who founded a lineage. The three most powerful clans oversee the entire race and have radically opposed aspirations and values.

"The Draculs are moderate. They do not forbid the drinking of human blood and do not condemn aggression out of necessity, but punish crimes severely. The millions of Laudarkvik humans under their control are safe in exchange for a monthly blood donation. With their Blood Thaumaturgy, they are reputed to be excellent healers and are relatively well regarded by the populace.

"The Nosferati do not engage in any trouble, but rumor has it that they are loyal to the Empire and their role is to monitor the various factions. They can divide their biomass into smaller animals, such as bats or crows, and if you feel like you're being watched in Laudarkvik, well, it's not just a feeling.

"Last but not least, the Thrajahs are one of the reasons why these merchants need to hire guys like me to escort them... They're Extremist Vampires. They have a harder time controlling their bloodlust than others, but they also see humans and even other factions as cattle to be enslaved. They've been advocating insurrection against Ret'Asi for a long time, and the Celestial City descent probably didn't help matters..."

All right, the Vampires were dangerous and not so nice. Jake could have guessed that on his own. For now it wasn't deviating too much from his predictions.

"You said the Were-beings and Demons had three seats each like the Vampires. Can I conclude that they are of comparable strength?" Jake asked pensively.

His cousin Kevin was a Werebear, but his strength wasn't on par with a guy like Wyatt, but could probably compete with a Vampire Noble like Seren. At least, back then. After that year of seclusion, he shouldn't judge his companions, much less his enemies on their past performance.

"I guess so. It is said that Vampires and Were-beings hate each other, but neither of them trust the Demons, and rightly so. In reality, it's more complicated than that. The Thrajah clan collaborates with

the Demons, the Nosferati are neutral with everyone, and the Draculs are only on bad terms with the Lycans and Avians.

"However, the number of seats awarded reflects more the number of powerhouses a faction has than its overall strength per se. The Astral leader, for example, is deemed invincible, while the Mutants are discriminated against by all factions including the humans."

"Why is that?"

"Because in the unclassifiable we find all the hybrids and mongrels that the other factions don't want. This includes Orc-dwarves, elf-goblins, ogre-gnomes and other less successful cocktails. Their leader is a Dhampir Daemon and is hated by almost all factions. If she wasn't powerful enough, she would have died long ago. Speaking of which... You and Ruby would automatically be affiliated with the Mutants once we reach Laudarkvik."

Jake laughed in amusement at this. The Mutant Faction was about to get a second seat. At least, he was going to do everything he could to obtain one.

"Let's go then. You can explain the rest to me on the way. We'll walk the rest of the distance so we don't attract attention too quickly." Jake decided.

He reactivated his Miniaturization spell, compressing his body back to near-human size and appearance, and then as he was about to wake up Ruby he realized that she was glaring at him silently with an all-consuming intensity. Nobody knew how long she had been staring at him like that.

"How long have you been awake?" Jake asked serenely.

"Since the beginning." She answered with a creepy smile.

Unperturbed, Jake nodded with his back to her. She vaguely heard him mutter under his breath something like "Perfect, no need to repeat myself."

The right corner of her lip twitched imperceptibly, but the irritated growl escaping from her throat was impossible to ignore. She wanted to retrieve her sniper before remembering that Jake had it in his possession. Furious, she grabbed an ordinary knife and threw it at the back of his neck with all her might.

She rejoiced when she saw that she had succeeded in her surprise attack, but was dismayed immediately afterwards to discover that her knife had no momentum. The blade ricocheted against Jake's back without causing any damage.

'So this is what it's like to be under a Slave Contract.' She bit her lip as she clenched her fists. 'Even if he doesn't do anything, I really can't kill him unless he orders me to. As for him, he can order me to sacrifice my life for him at any time. Life is really unfair...'

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Feeling something bounce against his back, Jake then heard the thud of the blade hitting the grass, and he gave the young woman a scoffing, murderous scowl.

"How does it feel to be at the mercy of someone you were trying to kill just minutes earlier?" Jake didn't hesitate to stir the pot to make her seethe even more.

Ruby tried to keep a straight face, but she was grinding her teeth so hard that it sounded like the shrill screeching of an iron bar being twisted. Her hate-filled amethyst eye also pulsed with a bright silver luster.

A new throwing knife appeared in her hand and her muscles contracted so hard that they almost doubled in size. All the while, Ruby had retained her true appearance and the silvery chitin covering her skin took on increasingly sharp and needle-like shapes. Her hostility was almost palpable and she seemed possessed by it.

When she threw her knife this time, Jake used his telekinesis to block the attack. The knife was easily stopped, but a slight gust of air caused by the projectile's sudden deceleration still hit his face. If he had not defended himself, he would have been injured. Still, it was far from enough to kill him.

Unless her Digestor part strengthened drastically, he had nothing more to fear from the young woman.

With foolproof equanimity, Jake picked up the two knives from the grass with exaggerated detachment, then gave her a falsely pitying look as he stood up.

"It would seem that your Digestor part is not fully subject to the Slave Contract." Jake commented offhandedly, confirming his suspicions. "I can't believe that a girl as sweet and sunny as you could degenerate to this point. Have you already given up? Or has the you standing in front of me always been the real you?"

Ruby, who wore a feral expression, was deeply unsettled by his words. The evil silver glint in her amethyst eye dimmed markedly, and a more familiar, anguished expression crept across her face.

"Even if I explained it to you, you wouldn't understand." She blazed coldly. "Assume that the Ruby before you is the real Ruby. It's easier that way. Don't give me any chance to kill you or you'll pay for it with your life. And that goes for all of you." She added as she brushed her eyes over the other group members.

"Sure." Jake said as he ogled her lewdly from head to toe. "But if you want your threats to be taken seriously, start by getting dressed first."

The young woman froze as she received this jibe, and finally noticed the insistent leering of Trash, Elduin and Bhammod. Her cheeks turned slightly pink before returning to their usual sickly pallor. Then, she snorted in scorn, and though she continued to sport a proud, icy facade, she hurried back to her human appearance and put on a pair of pants, a blouse, and a pair of boots that matched the bland colors of the dimly lit clearing around them.

"It seems you can still feel some shame." Jake teased her mirthlessly. "Although I must admit, I don't understand why you don't wear armor like everyone else. Wasn't the previous incident enough for you?"

"My armor is no match for my chitin." She retorted laconically.

"Fair point." Jake nodded.

After a year of training in the Purgatory, Jake could easily craft inferior Aether Artifacts from the materials around him, but he couldn't adjust their measurements easily. For this reason, he had several sets of identical armor in various sizes in his space storage.

These armors had no special abilities, but they boosted his attributes by about 1%, were shape memory and could withstand very high temperatures. The next step was to forge one with his blood to give them evolutionary potential and abilities aligned with his Bloodline. It was still a huge challenge for him, but some Myrmidians like Lucia were innately capable of it.

Jake and his new companions then spent most of the afternoon covering the last few dozen kilometers separating them from Laudarkvik on foot. They could have gone much faster (with the exception of Trash and Jeanie, everyone had superhuman physical abilities), but they deliberately took their time.

Bhammod claimed not to know much about this city, but he had a lot to say about this infamous place. Whether it was Jake or Ruby, they did not want to repeat the experience of Lodunvals.

Jake hadn't really made a mistake, other than underestimating the Lodunvals adventurers when he exposed Jeanie's presence, but Ruby was hanging onto his every word for... understandable reasons. She listened to the dwarf's words with the firm intention of never repeating such a day.

Bolstered by her success in charming a group of talented adventurers, she had irrationally provoked a potential enemy unaware of her presence, only to be given the beating of her life by both that enemy and another city native, ending up the slave of the former. One could hardly do worse as a morning.

She, who was once one of the elites of the government's Prodigies program, could hardly recognize herself in the mirror. She really had acted like an idiot...

'I hate my personality.' She lampooned as she glanced wistfully toward Jake. 'He must hate me too now.'

Of course he hated her. Jake couldn't read her mind, but anyone who tried to kill him was his mortal enemy. Now that she was his slave, the only thing that had changed was that he was now in a dominant position. And he had every intention of putting this advantageous situation to good use.

During the afternoon walk, Jake and his group passed through several villages. These were inhabited by ordinary human farmers, and for a moment they doubted the disastrous rumors about this region. If Bhammod had not briefed them on the way, they might have fallen for it.

First of all, the walls surrounding each village were not meant to protect the citizens, but to keep them from leaving.

"It doesn't look all that bad here..." Trash remarked as he received the wink of a girl his age sashaying over to him suggestively.

Ten seconds later, he had lost his dagger unknowingly. Neither Jake nor the others deigned to warn him. Seeing his downcast countenance a few minutes later, Jake apathetically blurted out,

"That'll teach you not to heed advice. There are no innocents here."

On the surface, the villages were prosperous, clean and teeming with people, but if one really paid attention one could see a certain underlying gloom and anxiety flickering in the eyes of each of these

countrymen. People did not shake hands, did not hug nor kiss each other. They were also all armed and their weapons were not chosen at random.

In addition to an ordinary steel dagger or sword, they all had a silver weapon. Most of them reeked of garlic, wolfsbane or other herbs reputed to be effective against monsters, while a purse stuffed with salt was fastened to the belt of each of them, including the children. Some of them had smeared and rubbed themselves with several of these substances, making them stink from dozens of meters away.

These normal people did not realize it, but invisible miasmas enveloped them when they were not outright ghosts with unclear intentions. The ones who had coated themselves with salt seemed to attract less of it than the others, but they still had two or three around them.

In a dark alley, Jake saw a young man being dragged into the darkness by a red-eyed woman half his size, and after a scream of terror, sucking sounds echoed through the alley. For a brief second he considered saving him, but after a few sips the vampire closed the wound with her saliva and snapped her fingers to end the hypnosis.

The young villager woke up disoriented and lost, but the vampire was already gone and he foolishly went about his business. The group heard him grumbling in a low voice as he passed them by,

"Damn it! I got screwed again. That's the third time this week."

Examining him fleetingly, Jake actually counted six scar points corresponding to three different pairs of canines. From this initial observation, he and the others studied the other villagers crossing their path one by one and discovered that most of them had similar scars on their necks or elsewhere.

And those were the relatively luckier villagers. Many of the less fortunate were missing an arm or a leg, while others had their faces and eye sockets hollowed out as if all their vitality had been wrung out.

The more fortunate citizens had their own bodyguards and tended to be less affected than the others, but most still had several permanent sequelae, such as a badly healed bite or a missing finger.

Overall, the most common aftereffect was that all these humans looked older than their age. Jake couldn't have guessed that at first glance, but the scan couldn't lie. The peasants who looked about 50 to him were rarely older than 35.

The guards patrolling these villages were no more serene than the citizens they were supposed to be defending, and Jake was surprised that they never intervened despite the incidents and crimes that went on all day long.

But when a couple of villagers tried to flee their village on horseback, a whole squadron of forty horsemen was immediately sent after them.

'Bhammod was right. These humans are cattle.' Jake sighed as he witnessed this time a cannibal man being arrested for eating his sister.

The prisoner pleaded his innocence to the guards, his face streaming with tears, but a shaggy, muscular man with yellow eyes took over from the jailers a few minutes later and took him to another room for questioning. No sound came out, but the next moment the same man arrested the prisoner's mother, who immediately turned into a hideous hairy beast and tried to run away on all fours.

