

Oracle 701

[Chapter 701 Who Gave You Permission To Leave?](#)

Or so it seemed. After the bright flash of lightning had dazzled their retinas, their sight gradually returned and the few survivors were given the opportunity to behold the scope of the disaster.

All the coaches and carriages that were still standing had a gaping hole in them, while the wood and cloth that were often part of their design had caught fire or burned to a crisp.

Of the 2,400 refugees still alive, more than 2,000 had been blown to death on impact. The remaining 400 survived only by a fortunate combination of circumstances. Once unleashed, the lightning had an erratic trajectory.

Those who were closest to the mysterious attacker had somehow borne the brunt of the attack for the others. As the lightning weakened with each subsequent person struck, the 400 survivors escaped with minor injuries, but many of them, including a few children, required emergency treatment that no one could provide.

The toughest humans were also the ones least afraid of these Vampires and the attacker had made a special effort to target them first.

The Pastry Chef who had so impressed the Wengols with her bravery and brawn lay curled up in a ring of barren ashes, her remains irreversibly charred, a huge smoking hole in her chest. She was no longer breathing.

The other exceptional craftsmen had not escaped either. The few elite officers and soldiers who had protected the civilians so far had also been targeted first, and only one Rank A warrior with the rank of commander was still standing, though badly scorched.

The only craftsman who barely survived was the sturdy blacksmith who was close to retirement. He owed his survival only to the extraordinary features of his Soul Class. A Grandmaster Blacksmith could also forge any material, including treating his own body as such. At his level, the strength of his body was comparable in every way to that of his best creations.

As for the Wengols, their anatomy was fundamentally superior to that of humans and these 300 warriors represented the elite of the elite. In addition to being much more massive and rugged, the oil their skin produced also seemed to have good electrical insulating potential. Only half of them had been culled.

However, the remaining 150 survivors did not fare so well. To survive, they had excreted most of the water and oil content of their bodies, and even with this asset their once slimy and smooth skin had become as cracked and pitch black as a lump of coal. In the end, only Urzul and his two second in command were still able to fight.

Then there was Jake and Ruby. If there was one target that the man who unleashed this dreadful outpouring of lightning had to take down, it was this male Mutant.

Staring stoically into the sky, where the biggest lightning bolt had struck, the enigmatic attacker squinted his eyes gravely as he saw two silhouettes reappear in the same position.

" Bloody hell! I wouldn't want to take that one in the face!" Jake whistled audibly as he turned off his Oracle Shield.

Indeed, he had activated his Oracle Shield in time. Jake had sensed early on that the situation was going to get out of hand. Whether it was a native, or a Player, he had taken precautions. With his Oracle Cloaking and Promotion skills activated, the probability of a Player having a better Oracle Rank than him in this Ordeal was extremely low.

And his gamble had paid off. Throughout this battle, and even more so after the arrival of those Vampires, Jake had never let up, always keeping an eye on his Shadow Guide. With his intelligence and multitasking ability, it wasn't hard.

When the Shadow Guide suddenly activated his Oracle Shield, Jake didn't even think for a second and activated his own. He still didn't trust the Oracle System, preferring to act on his own, but when the latter advised him to protect himself urgently, he would be a complete retard if he were to ignore such a warning.

"Cough, cough! Help me instead of bitching... I took it straight on..." A throaty female voice, as faint as a whisper suddenly blurted out to his right.

Who else could it be but Ruby? The chitin armor had been completely glazed over and the skin underneath was utterly charred. If the cold accumulated in her cells had not burst forth a moment earlier, she would have ended up scorched like the others.

Jake was speechless.

"You didn't activate your Oracle Shield in time?!" He exclaimed in mock concern, "Looks like karma isn't done with you yet. In the future, be a decent person."

His condescending, fawningly benevolent tone washed away the last shred of the young woman's composure.

" Go fuck yourself, shithead! If you hadn't forced me to fork over all my Aether, how could a situation like this ever happen?!" Ruby yammered, her haughty, loathsome composure finally cracking to give way to a young woman at her wit's end and full of resentment.

She was so pissed off and riled by his cocky smirking face that her usually icy exterior had taken on the complexion of a ripe tomato and a frustrated pout pursed her lips. She was about ready to fight it out with her fists right now!

Noticing that the two Mutants in the sky were still finding the leisure to squabble after being struck by lightning, a bemused frown flashed across their attacker's face.

"Interesting."

The man's casual, almost playful remark put an end to Jake's taunting. The two Players finally took the time to properly assess their assailant.

The spiritual pressure radiating from him was not much stronger than that of Jake and Ruby. That was weird enough considering the sheer power of his previous attack, but once they recognized the bracelet on his wrist they were left in no doubt.

This formidable opponent was a Player like them. Sneaking a glance at the other two hooded individuals, Jake wondered if these two were natives, or Players on the same team.

The lightning-wielding Player was a manly man, a genuine one. About 3 meters tall, his musculature was so developed and perfect that an ordinary human would have struggled to achieve such a physique without using doping products. Yet, in this guy, this musculature, this feeling of strength seemed completely innate.

The man was young, but the thick mane, and the big tangled beard of the same hue as his lightning made him look 20 years older. His bushy eyebrows were so angled and his facial features so sharp that anyone would be spontaneously inclined to regard him as a tough guy.

The individual was shirtless, purely cosmetic red stripes tattooed on his chest and face. A metal shoulder pad sculpted to resemble some creature covered his left shoulder, and held in place by a horizontal leather band covering a portion of his pectoral and disappearing under his right armpit. His hands were covered by dirty strips browned by dried blood or wine, over which he had donned gauntlets made of the same leather and metal as his shoulder pad. For the rest, he wore loose pants and boots made of worn cloth and beast leather, a tanned hide falling around his waist to his knees and held in place with an equally worn belt.

A barbarian! That was the first comment that came to mind when describing this person. This Player would have gone unnoticed in the middle of a Viking mob, but unlike those glorified warriors of the past, his body was cloaked in a thin halo of electricity, crackling from time to time as an arc of electricity sizzled around him. His electric gaze sparkled with cleverness and was devoid of the lack of manners and brutality traditionally associated with such characters.

Looking at him, Jake knew at once that this Player was going to be one of his biggest rivals in this Ordeal. The barbarian had the same impression, but unlike Jake he only saw him as one of many players he would have to trample during his Ordeal.

Turning to the other two hooded figures waiting near the carriage, the barbarian queried their opinions with a look and the one controlling the Undeads ultimately nodded.

"Let's go. This is not the place to fight them. In some respects, we are on the same side." The third hooded figure croaked in a grating voice.

The Thunderman let out a disgruntled groan, but he calmly made his way to the carriage, obviously intending to leave.

"WHO GAVE YOU PERMISSION TO LEAVE THIS PLACE?!"

Norton's abysmal voice rumbled through their eardrums, the sound wave blasting the plain with mind-numbing force. Looking up, Jake saw the huge gorilla titan drumming his chest with his fists from the top of the nearest mountain.

The reinforcements had finally arrived!

The huge beast fell back heavily into a quadrupedal position and with a spectacular leap hurtled through the air, despite its staggering mass of tens, if not hundreds, of tons. The gigantic creature landed in front

of the convoy with a great crash, which made the earth shake and resulted in a large crater under its legs.

ROOOOARRRR!

A toothy grin crept across the face of the lightning-wielding barbarian as the shockwave and a monstrous spiritual blast hit him. Without budging, the Player crossed his fists in front of his face to protect himself from the debris, but his eyes remained locked on the monster.

"They tell Laudarkvik that the Mutant Faction is weak, but it looks like they lied or their data is wrong." The barbarian complimented, a flicker of warlike excitement flashing in his eyes.

Seeing the extent of the slaughter, Norton flatly ignored the tiny human's acknowledgment and picked up a huge boulder almost as large as him and smashed him down with it.

A demon gorilla was not known for chattering.

[Chapter 702 My Precious](#)

A deafening shockwave blasted the area in a thirty meter radius, the huge rock splintering into pieces on impact. Shards of debris flew in all directions, accompanied by a massive cloud of dust, most of it banging directly against Norton's thick fur.

Jake shuddered as he imagined how he would have fared against this infinitely violent onslaught, but the mutant gorilla did not stop roaring after that first blow. The rock his huge hands held having shattered, his fists clenched and the monster went into a killing frenzy, compulsively slamming his fists down with demonic savagery.

Each successive punch was like a thousand ton heavenly hammer striking the earth. Whatever was underneath, it had no chance of surviving. Blow after blow, the earth caved in further, the crater widening and deepening.

RRROOOOARR!

When the huge beast slammed his fists down one last time in a frightful combo, a shockwave even more terrifying than the previous ones swept across the plain, pulverizing most of the already battered stagecoaches and wagons. The gorilla's fists remained pressed against the ground in a hammering posture, as if they were trying to hammer in a stubborn nail.

Could it be that the Player below had not yet been flattened?

As he and Ruby curiously scanned the battle area, they found that the Aetheric signature of the Player smashed by Norton was still strong, but his vital signs were not.

When the dust settled, they got a clearer picture and the lightning wielder was there, his legs so bent that he was this close to kneeling. His muscles were strained to the extreme, his veins swollen like little snakes, and a puddle of perspiration trickled down at his feet, but the barbarian was very much alive.

His arms were still crossed over his head in a defensive stance, unwaveringly protecting the Player's face and other vital organs. An ocean of lightning flickered in his pupils and although the man was smeared with blood, his toothy grin and fighting intent had not wavered one bit.

"Awesome." Jake muttered under his breath. Ruby next to him didn't say anything, but the silver glow behind her pupils pulsed more wildly than ever.

Speaking frankly, neither Jake nor she had expected to meet players of this caliber in their Fourth Ordeal. At least not this early.

If it was Jake taking that beating, could he display the same unwavering will? Yes, most certainly. But that was because deep down he thought he was exceptional among his peers.

During his third Ordeal, no Player, except Wyatt and Boris, had managed to awaken his competitive spirit. He had made enemies, but it was always against him that they conspired, not the other way around.

At this precise moment, he was overwhelmed by an ardent desire to measure himself against this lightning wielding barbarian. The outcome of the fight was unknown, but that was precisely what his Myrtharian Bloodline was looking for to further elevate himself and break his chains.

While Norton clashed with this unknown Player, trying to smash him with his fists, the humans and Players on his back had long since landed to rescue the other refugees. Because of the circumstances, they did not immediately attack the Wengols, wanting to understand the situation first.

"Are you done?" The barbarian suddenly growled with a trace of fury and condescension in his voice. Norton, who was still trying to crush him with his fists, even felt a note of threat.

Just when the beast was doubting his own perceptions, a chill of danger bristled through his thick fur. The resistance under his fists intensified and an irresistible pushing force began to repel his hands. Simultaneously, a hooded figure obstructed his vision, an enchanted dagger popping just millimeters from his huge right eye.

With his eye threatened, Norton had no choice but to abandon his offense. Closing the targeted eye, he lowered his head to take the dagger blow with his forehead whose skin was dozens of times denser than leather.

The assassin seemed to have anticipated this scenario as his figure dissolved in a swirl of cloak, his black mantle veiling the demon gorilla's face. With ethereal movements of inhuman grace, the figure ran and somersaulted through the air as if it weighed nothing before reappearing under the crotch of the giant mutant.

With a sinister gleam in its vertical pupils, the silver sheen of a dagger sliced through something dangling loosely above the assassin and a heartbreaking roar of agony pierced the silence.

"RROOOOARRRR !!!!"

Unwitting tears of suffering streamed down the gorilla's face. Jake and the other bystanders who witnessed the scene subconsciously clenched their legs at the sight. Poor Norton.

Thud.

The hairy sausage-like mass of flesh with its two melons fell heavily onto the electric player below, along with a spray of hot blood. He, who until now had shown such wonderful equanimity, immediately began to hurl names at his savior.

"***** Goddamn it, Shamash! Did you really need to drop a dick on me?!"

"Gheheehe! You should be thanking me instead. You looked like you were in trouble..." The insulted man burst out laughing. Without his coat and hood, his appearance was visible to all.

He too wore an Oracle Device on his wrist, but it had been camouflaged as a gold armband. Only the other players of adequate Oracle Rank could sense its existence. In this instance, only Jake and that was because he had activated the Oracle Skill Promotion.

The man was of ordinary height for a Player, less than two meters, and was also significantly older than his comrade, approaching sixty years. His orange eyes with slit pupils were sunken in their sockets and filled with a chilling cruelty and indifference.

Despite his age, his black hair and beard were meticulously trimmed and his tanned skin glowed with youth and vitality. It was the same for his athletic physique, which without falling into the hypertrophied dysmorphism of his comrade, was close to perfection. But unlike the barbarian, his morphology was very functional, that of a killing machine.

By way of clothing, this intimidating Player wore only a pair of baggy black pants, a purple belt, a pair of matching boots, a bandana and a huge solid gold necklace made of rectangular pieces resembling playing cards. The dagger he had just used was still in his hand, but a huge saw was strapped behind his back.

Standing next to his comrade wrapped in a halo of electricity, this Player looked much more ordinary but the aura of cruelty and malice emanating from him was out of this world compared to the barbarian. As for his spirit aura and Aether signature, as soon as the man stopped suppressing it, Jake and the others knew at once that they were no match for him.

While the lightning wielder aroused Jake's competitive spirit, this Player only made him feel helpless and hopeless. As if they were not worthy to compete against him. If the courage and pride of the Myrtharians running through his veins didn't dictate his personality, Jake could have very well given up and run away.

And he wasn't the only one who refused to consider retreat.

ROOOOOARRRR!

The giant gorilla who had just been castrated against his will went into a killing frenzy, his instincts and intellect degenerating into their most primitive form.

BANG!

The tail swipe that followed swept through the air with such force that a shrill whistle sliced through space with teleportation-like speed. The barbarian and his fellow castrator were struck head-on and blasted away. A spray of golden blood erupted from the second Player's mouth as they crashed into a nearby mountain.

The gorilla picked up his "precious" limb and went after the two culprits. Norton, who had all but lost his mind, managed to maintain a last semblance of sanity and telepathically growled to his squad,

'I'll leave you to deal with the Lich.'

What Lich? Jake and the others didn't know who Norton was referring to, but by process of elimination they knew it could only be the third hooded figure, still waiting stoically in front of the carriage.

By tacit agreement, all the Mutants, humans and Wengols present surrounded it, leaving it no escape. Unfortunately, as soon as the Lich felt threatened, the 60,000 Undeads stationed at a distance began to move again, tightening the noose around the survivors.

At the same time, those who had been electrocuted to death by the barbarian chose this moment to resurrect, joining the ranks of the Undead army. While Norton had just rid them of the two most dangerous enemies, the situation had drastically worsened.

"Kakakaka! Why don't we all take a step back?" The hooded Lich suggested, a greenish fire glowing in his empty eye sockets. "I admit that we should have informed you of this operation, but the creation of this army is necessary for the survival of Laudarkvik. If you agree to let me go, I promise to reward you handsomely."

Jake and the other Players frowned, exchanging indecisive glances, but the human and Wengol survivors exploded with rage at his words. Instead of saving them, had Laudarkvik just wiped them out to replenish his ranks? Outrageous!

Just as Jake and the others had already decided in their hearts to follow the last order of the eunuch Norton, a galloping sound was heard behind them. Turning their heads, they saw a dozen human riders with an escort of ghosts forming a long flag of dim light behind them for those who were able to see them.

More reinforcements had just arrived.

[Chapter 703 Despair](#)

At the sight of reinforcements, the Lich, who was surrounded, halted the march of its Undead army. That alone should have tipped them off. Flames of gloating and derision blazed inside its empty eye sockets, but the humans and Wengols in front of it saw nothing but provocation.

"DIE!" Urzul, the human commander, and the old blacksmith threw themselves furiously at the hooded Lich.

"WAIT!" Jake yelled, firing air bullets past them to stop them, but he was too far away.

The old blacksmith was the only one who was not a fighter, so the supersonic compressed air bullet successfully managed to shock him out of his wits. He was so startled that he rolled backwards, only catching himself by bouncing back nearly twenty meters.

But this was far from enough to make the two veteran warriors relent. The hatred burning in Urzul's heart had long since passed the threshold of what was bearable, while the badly wounded human commander knew he didn't have long to live, and was desperate to get this Lich's head to clear his honor.

Urzul ignored the bullet, letting it rip a hole in his shoulder, while the commander managed to sidestep it with a marvelous and unfathomable movement technique. For a fleeting moment, his body seemed to

duplicate itself, and even the rocky obstacles that Jake conjured up in a hurry afterwards were not enough to stall him.

"Damn it!" Jake cursed. Didn't they realize he was trying to save their lives?

How could a Lich who could place 60,000 Death Marks in their bodies behind their backs be weak? The two terrifying Players accompanying it had left it alone without the slightest hesitation, and Jake wasn't so naive as to believe that it was because fear had forced them to flee in a rush.

Pragmatic, Jake stopped hindering them in vain and telepathically ordered all his companions, "Flight formation!"

Ruby, Carmin, Lily, Bhammod, Elduin, Trash and Jeanie immediately understood his intent. Upon discovering Jake and Ruby's telekinetic abilities, Norton had never suggested this formation or joining the refugee convoy would have been much easier and they wouldn't have had to split up like this.

Of course, Jake and Ruby could have suggested this option and made it clear what they were capable of, but they still didn't trust Norton enough to reveal all their trump cards to him.

In any case, it wasn't as if the Mutant in question was willing to let himself be carted around in the sky at several thousand meters above sea level. When one reached Norton's status, one had long since stopped trusting anyone, and that was the first lesson he had made a point of instilling in them from the start.

That's why Jake had only informed his companions in case of a mishap and not his superior. One had to wonder why Jake would resort to this escape plan now, but it wasn't out of cowardice. If they could get rid of the Lich, they would. But, this position was too unfavorable.

They were surrounded by a huge army, reinforcements charging straight at them, not the Lich or the Undeads, and not even the human refugees, with a baffling decisiveness... It was not an ideal posture to carry off such a disadvantageous battle, and his comrades understood this very well.

Letting Jake fly at full speed over to them and envelop them with his telekinesis one after another, they let him drag them along as he pleased to demonstrate to the refugees that they had nothing to fear. Having a good feeling about the two Mutants, the few survivors, especially the children in the heart of the convoy who had escaped the barbarian's lightning bolts broke down in tears as they watched him take to the skies.

"What about the refugees?" Trash panicked as he saw the ground moving away from him.

Jake shook his head apologetically as he continued to pick up speed.

"Look ahead." Elduin winced bitterly as he notched one of the few remaining arrows he had left. He had picked them up after each skirmish, but most of them had broken after being shot repeatedly.

Following the elf's advice, Bhammod, Trash and Jeanie saw several winged figures flapping their wings above them. Seen from the ground, they seemed no larger than a swallow, but as they got closer, these flying creatures quickly exceeded the wingspan of the largest bird they had ever seen, even in pictures.

The largest, at the very center of their aerial formation had a fairly humanoid morphology, like an athlete covered in dark brown plumage. In addition to its two large colored wings, it also had a pair of

muscular arms ending in two dark talons. Very vaguely, this creature could evoke some depictions of the Egyptian god Horus.

"An Avian!" Bhammod snarled as he resolutely swung his battle axe. "And a very strong one! If it's not a Daemon or a Spirit Beast, it should be a Were Golden Eagle."

"That means the Werebeings are also involved in the operation. Looks like the Mutants were the only ones in the dark." Ruby sighed, lamenting inwardly that this was the worst Ordeal start she'd experienced since she entered the Mirror Universe.

"We'll worry about that later." Jake chided her in annoyance as he raised his saber as well.

Preparing for the impending impact, they could no longer worry about either the refugees or the Lich. The Alpha Avian leading the flock of birds screeched loudly and huge birds of prey of various shapes and forms swooped down on them in a flock with breathtaking speed and accuracy.

Simultaneously on the ground, Urzul's solid gold trident came within an inch of the Lich's heart, preparing to impale it without mercy. The human commander had shifted to his back with his ethereal step, and his sword wrapped in a shrill blur of energy pierced forward with a firm resolve to drill a hole in its skull.

At that moment, time seemed to stop around the Lich. Urzul, who was about to impale it, froze in place, skewered by a sharp, half-bony, half-metallic stalactite that sprang from the Lich's chest. The more agile human commander fared better, but a deep wound under his throat added to the damage. When he reappeared ten meters away, he slumped in his own blood unable to stand.

"Tsktsktsk... Poor souls. I don't know what fly bit you to think you had any chance." The Lich sneered grimly. "But you're lucky, I'm in a merciful mood and I'm willing to grant you a second chance."

Casually waving a shimmering metallic hand, the stalactites retracted into his body, ending his urchin-like guise. At the same time, the Wengol general's giant body withered, as if it had just aged a century in a split second. Except, unlike Carmin's method of execution, this was not due to dehydration.

The human commander who barely escaped this fate, died as a result of his heavy blood loss. But their final fate was exactly the same. Less than three seconds later, they rose to their feet, joining the ranks of the other 60,000 Undeads.

The chilling scene amplified the despair of the few remaining survivors, but with the Mutants gone, they could only await their end. The Lich, swept over the sobbing, kneeling crowd with a disinterested, dull gaze, but its sadism was awakened when it heard suspicious moans from one of the carriages.

Against all odds, there were humans dense enough to continue fornicating under such circumstances? Really... This race deserved to be enslaved. Laughing ominously, the Lich walked over to the vehicle in question, whistling to itself.

This aristocrat, nephew of the Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Guards, may have been the scum of the earth, but unknowingly, by his outrageous behavior, he had just done a good deed. His future death in excruciating pain had offered a respite to the few survivors.

BOOOM!

Several thousand meters above, the clash had begun. Jake and Ruby were the only ones who could really fly, so it was a hopeless battle. Unless they abandoned their comrades, they were in for a rough time.

Jake retrieved a handful of the sharpened scrap metal in his Space Storage and used it as ammunition to fire a barrage of telekinetically propelled bullets at the cluster of Avians. Ruby, who no longer had her sniper artifact, snatched a few projectiles from Jake and used them to supplement his first salvo.

Swooping in at full speed, a third of the Avians were riddled with bullets before they could react, their bodies instantly ripped to shreds. Feathers, guts and blood rained down on them. The remaining two-thirds were more alert or lucky and managed to twist around in time.

At this terrific speed, with each group hurtling toward the other, there was no time for a second burst. The two squads met just after, colliding with a deafening BANG. Heartbreaking shrieks of pain echoed just after.

To protect Trash, Bhammod in the vanguard was rammed into by a harpy as big as a dinosaur and was catapulted well out of Jake's zone of control. In return, the bird that attacked him was smacked by a monstrous axe pommel strike that blew his brains out.

Trash was protected just in time by Jake with a barrier, but the shockwave wrecked his insides. His skull caved in, as did his torso, and like Bhammod, the teenager was thrown out of reach.

Carmin used her whip to tie herself to her sister Lily, but the two women were swarmed by seven particularly cunning and ferocious humanoid horned crows. They too were thrown out of the formation.

Elduin, showing his virtuoso arching skills, ran out of arrows just before impact. More fragile than Bhammod, but much more nimble, he managed to mount the bird trying to peck him with its beak, but he too was separated from the group.

Jeanie, being hidden in Jake's pocket, was soon left with only him and Ruby to face the remaining Avians alone.

[Chapter 704 Avians](#)

The Alpha Were Golden Eagle leading this group of Avians had not swooped in with the rest of his squad. When all of Jake's companions were being ejected from the formation by these monsters, he and three other Werebirds of prey had stayed back, overseeing the assault from their high position.

The pupils of their black-rimmed orange eyes were fully dilated, taking in as much information as they could. Arms crossed, they watched as Jake and Ruby coldly exterminated the rest of the Avians with nightmare-like brutality and zest.

One might wonder why they didn't help their subordinates, but first it had to be understood that these moronic Avians and Werebeings didn't have much in common. In Laudarkvik, these Avians were just expendable cannon fodder.

In the larger Werebeings family, the Avians included, strictly speaking, all the sapient humanoid birds under their control, but there were several rungs among them.

However, in the broadest sense, Avian referred to both the various Were-bird variants as well as all those flying species under their control or stuck in that animal state. Some could be terrifying Daemons, but the vast majority were just common birds or Were-birds that had lost the ability to become human again.

Indeed, an innate ability of all Were-beings was to be able to dominate, communicate, and command the species their powers were based on. For one Were Eagle, there could be hundreds of eagles and other birds of prey under their control and even more if they made a sincere effort to expand their army.

One of the three guards, a White Avian with hawk-like features, involuntarily shuddered with fear as he watched in amazement the slaughter perpetrated by Jake and Ruby. Of the four Werebeings, it was the one with the most frail stature, while its black beak and pale, silky plumage identified it as a juvenile.

"Don't look away, Qewie." The Golden Eagle Alpha ordered crisply. "If we fail our mission, they will be your sworn enemies in the future."

The man named Qewie fidgeted around nervously, but ended up nodding timidly. The other two Werebeings shook their heads in exasperation as they saw the chick shaking in fright.

"You are not ready for this fight." The Golden Eagle stated stiffly. "Just sit back and watch us do it this time and learn from it. Your life is more important than ours."

The Qewie falcon continued to twiddle his talons together to keep his anxiety in check, but eventually he asked the question that had been plaguing him.

"Do we really have to do this? Aren't we all supposed to be on the same side?"

The Golden Eagle sighed.

"You're way too naive." One of the other two Werebeings berated him harshly. "In these doomsday times, being nice to everybody is being cruel to yourself. This battle is inevitable."

These harsh words coincided with Jake and Ruby's slaying of the last Avian. They were strong, their spiritual presence exceeding level 50, but the gap between their physiques was just too great.

The only reason Jake had struggled against a Rank-B Adventurer at Lodunvals was because he had wanted to personally test the native's limits. It had taught him that a powerful Spirit Body combined with a decent Soul Class was a lethal danger to him, but it didn't change the core physical abilities of the individual.

A sedentary adult human had a Strength of 1 to 2. Even with an exceptional Soul Class increasing stats by 100% per level, at level 50 it was still only 50 to 100 points. That was still 10 to 20 times less than Jake's physical Strength.

With their Soul Class Skills and powerful souls, these natives might be able to make up for and even exceed the disparity in power between them, but they couldn't as easily bridge the gap between their reflexes and reaction time. And it was bad luck for them. Since Jake had become a Rune Engraver, his intelligence had become his forte.

No matter how deftly and unpredictably these birds performed their aerial stunts, in Jake's eyes they were as slow as turtles. The closer they were to him, the more precise and unavoidable his attacks would become.

After firing his first long-range salvo, Jake was left to engage them in close combat, but this was not a disadvantage to him at all. Freed from his burdens that were his comrades, he could now devote himself body and soul to the enemies in front of him and the least one could say was that it was nothing less than a proper extermination.

The first Avian who pounced on him, talons extended, literally felt as if he was offering his throat to a guillotine. Carried away by its momentum and unaware of its imminent death, its feathery neck met the blade carelessly placed there by Jake to intercept it and its head separated from its body like a red-hot wire slicing through butter.

The bird's head and body then pursued their fall with two different trajectories, while Jake had already slightly shifted his other claw to slice the wing of a second assailant. Shorn of a wing, the bird let out a screech of pain, and then began to plummet as it spun around before smashing into a rock 2,000 meters below.

Those who attacked Ruby didn't fare much better. Even without Aether, nor Aether Artifact, her fighting skills were not something these brainless birds could match.

The first Avian tried to pierce her skull with its beak, but a crust of chitin covered her forehead before the impact. Simultaneously, a pair of chitin mandibles sprouting from nowhere on either side of her head clamped down on the creature's temples, shattering its skull like a coconut thrown off a cliff.

The next two Avians tried to pincer her, but the tip of her right foot smacked into the cheek of the first, deflecting its charge toward its comrade, while her left palm grazed the neck of the second, eventually forcing the two birds to collide.

The beak of the first bird went into the stomach of the second, and the talons of the second into the eye of the first one. Dazed, Ruby then kicked them hard, sending them crashing into a carriage down below.

The rest were exterminated with equal ease and neither Jake nor Ruby had to use any Aether or Bloodline Skills to defeat them. Hence the dark and alarmed expression of the four Were-eagles.

As ordered, young Qewie stayed back, even flapping his wings a few times to regain some altitude, but the other three Avians began to glide slowly down toward Jake with a spine-chilling killing intent. The spiritual pressure that fell on Jake and Ruby at this point was so great that it threatened to obliterate their consciousness at the slightest miscalculation.

The duo scanned the three enemies in unison and both their faces fell as they read the report.

[(Elite) Were Golden Eagle lvl 79]

[Were Peregrine Falcon lvl 73]

[Were Bearded Vulture lvl 77]

Swallowing, Jake croaked in a hoarse voice, not taking his eyes off the three approaching enemies,

"Ruby, I'll leave you to deal with the Peregrine Falcon and Bearded Vulture. I don't care how you do it, as long as I don't have them in my way."

Blushing slightly (what the heck?), Ruby smiled cutely as she replied,

"It's as good as done."

The next moment, a feral expression distorted her features, an out-of-control silver shimmer burning in her pupils. Her chitin-covered body suddenly emitted a bright blue flash before turning into a trail of light, which struck the Peregrine Falcon before ricocheting off the Bearded Vulture.

After being hit, both Were-beings began to sway strangely, looking blankly as if they were in some kind of trance. The blue light continued to bounce from one to the other as if it were a set of mirrors, and both warriors began to free fall as they forgot to flap their wings.

Another Dream Spell.

Jake's hair stood on end as he watched the scene. She hadn't used this technique against him during their previous fight or it would have been much more difficult to subdue her. Still, he noticed that she seemed to be stuck in that light phase when she was fighting like that.

Something told him that this luminous state must have a much higher combat potential, but there must also be some prohibitive drawbacks to enjoy this state of invincibility. The scorching smell where the light kept ricocheting confirmed to him that it was not a mere hypnosis spell. But Jake knew firsthand how exhausting using light to attack was, let alone when combined with such an unstoppable mental spell.

If Ruby couldn't mentally overpower her opponents, the only end that awaited her was to run out of energy. At that point she would be at the mercy of her enemies having only suffered through a short nap.

And the energy expenditure was indeed immeasurable. Less than three seconds later, Ruby resumed her human form on the Bearded Vulture's back, her legs firmly wrapped around its neck and clamping down violently to strangle it. A silvery chitin growth shaped like the skeleton of a wing had sprouted from her shoulder, harpooning the Peregrine Falcon's wing.

She had successfully cleared the field for Jake, but those brief seconds had cost her dearly. She was sweating profusely and what little fat she had on her body had completely melted away.

The two Were-birds of prey snapped out of their trance as soon as she stopped her transformation and the trio continued to plummet, teetering in the air with a chaotic trajectory before disappearing behind a mountain.

Jake was now free to focus on his own opponent, which promised to be his toughest fight since the one against his Digestor clone. Unlike his encounter with Laudar, he couldn't run away this time.

[Chapter 705 Try Me](#)

"Is this fight really necessary?" Jake scolded hideously as he saw the Alpha Were-eagle descend majestically towards him, beak up, and wings unfurled to better display his contempt.

Deep inside Jake only had one desire: to fly to the rescue of his comrades. Since they had been kicked out of the formation, he hadn't received any news from them.

He wasn't too worried about Carmin and her sister, but Trash had been hit pretty hard. He didn't dare assume the worst, but the kid was probably dead. If his wounds hadn't killed him, the fall would have taken his life.

Scanning the ground, Jake confirmed that Carmin and the others were still alive, but they were in bad shape. The Avians were the least of their worries after landing, but they also had to deal with an army of 60,000 Undeads, a Lich with unknown abilities, and fake reinforcements whose intentions were unclear.

Trash's life signature was nowhere to be found. Without knowing why, his heart sank as he found no trace of the teenager. He'd known him for less than 24 hours, so it wasn't quite apprehension and even less sadness. There was some of that of course, but if he had to choose two words to define what he was feeling, it was closer to anger and remorse.

His inability to protect a simple child, no matter how useless and foolish, brought him face to face with his own powerlessness. That horrible feeling of inadequacy that had plagued him for so much of his life because of the comparison with his cousins threatened to overwhelm him once again.

If he couldn't even save a simple kid, how could he save Anya, his uncle Kalen, his family, his friends? It sounded like an unhealthy heroic savior syndrome, but Jake currently needed that certainty of power, that unwavering belief in himself in order not to flinch.

His sanity and self-confidence were at stake. These pseudo-experts could say as much as they wanted about a healthy mind in a healthy body, but Jake couldn't care less who came first between the egg and the chicken.

Without his power, without his recent achievements, he was nothing.

Xi, who shared her consciousness with Jake, could clearly feel his inner turmoil, but other than silently supporting him, she couldn't lift him out of this permanent feeling of insecurity. His Myrtharian Bloodline only mitigated, hid his neuroses, but whenever a drama forced him to confront them, they came back stronger than ever.

[As long as you keep fighting like you do, one day you'll see the light.] She claimed with absolute conviction.

"Beat that cross-eyed pigeon!" Jeanie yelled as she waved her little fists, her adorable poppy red face sticking out of the pocket as she glared hard at the imposing Were-eagle.

The Were-being, who until then had shown a wonderful composure, stiffened slightly upon hearing the Minmin's insult. Just you wait! Once he was done with this Mutant, he would gobble this fairy up like a peanut, starting by ripping off her wings first.

"Beat me up? You really don't know who's in front of you, or the mess you've gotten yourself into." The Alpha Eagle sneered.

Just as the last word echoed through the air, the Were-being flapped its wings and shot like a bullet in their direction. Jake, who was conflicted between concern for his companions and self-loathing, barely had time to raise his sword before he was smashed into the distance.

Crack!

His forearm snapped as he blocked the blow, the vibrations of his saber stemming from the impact rattling him all the way to his shoulder. Before he could even process the pain of the first hit, a flurry of talons, wings, beaks and wind blades rained down on him, trying to rip him to shreds.

Jake was so shocked by the sheer speed and power of the bird that he momentarily forgot about his friends, too focused on trying to stay alive. Supersonic booms continued to sound several times a second, their silhouettes seemingly teleporting across the airspace above the plain.

For a fleeting millisecond, Jake even caught a glimpse of Ruby covered in silver blood, fiercely fighting the other two Were-beings. She had grown chitin wings on her back and had almost doubled in size, now looking more like a horned demon spawn than a human.

Refocusing on his own opponent, Jake activated Bloodline Ignition, his physical and mental abilities increasing substantially, and taking advantage of his slower reaction time and better computational skills he meticulously controlled his Strength, Agility and Constitution Aether to augment his injured arm.

The Alpha Eagle's second talon strike scraped against his blade, setting off a spray of sparks. This time his arm didn't budge one bit. His enemy showed a slight surprise at the strong resistance, but it only strengthened his resolve to eliminate this Mutant.

His spirit energy and killing intent erupted forth and Jake suddenly beheld the illusion of a gigantic behemoth identical in every way to the Alpha Eagle standing in front of him instead of his opponent. The reverse wing slap that slammed into him was like a kilometer-high tsunami and he felt half his bones shatter as his body flew through the air leaving a trail of blood in its wake.

"Jake?!" Jeanie screamed in panic. On impact, Jake had shielded her with his free hand to keep her from being blown apart.

[He is coming again.] Xi remarked soothingly, but by the subtle tremor in her voice she wasn't as calm as she was trying to pretend.

Still dizzy, Jake grunted as the humanoid eagle streaked down on him like a cannonball. His broken bones were nothing. With his Vitality, Constitution and Digitalization, any non-lethal injury was negated in an instant.

Jake was in a quandary, however. He had already realized after these three exchanges that this fight in the air would be his downfall if he kept fighting on his opponent's battlefield. To fly, and especially to fly fast, he had to harness his telekinesis and sometimes even heat and plasma blasts when he needed a burst of explosiveness.

While he flew like this, his mind and his Aether Core had very little energy to spare and even fewer options to deal with the Alpha Eagle's daunting assaults. In contrast, his opponent was a super-powered monster at full capacity.

His physical strength and basic speed were about half of Jake's, which in itself was a feat, but when combined with his Soul Class and skills, the eagle totally outclassed him.

His talons, wings and beak seemed to be wrapped in a strange energy comparable to Sharpening Aether but much more condensed, making them capable of slicing through his skin and bones despite his 5200 Constitution and Silver Stone Skin.

The overwhelming spiritual domination that his opponent exerted over him through his lvl 79 Spirit Body resulted in his perception of reality being twisted every time the Were-Eagle got too close to him. This psychic energy also permeated his every attack and movement, giving them considerable power of a quality Jake could not clearly define.

On the sixth talon strike, his forearm fractured again, and on the ninth, his shoulder was dislocated. On the tenth move, realizing that Jake was not nearly about to fall, the Alpha Eagle's beak began to vibrate at a frequency close to ultrasound and the next moment Jake felt as if he had been rammed by a truck.

The Oracle Shield saved his life and he was blasted for several kilometers before he was able to stabilize. If the Shadow Guide had not warned him in time, he would have been seriously injured.

Stunned by the failure of his killing move, the Alpha Were-Eagle massaged his sore beak with confusion, then with a flutter of his wings launched another attack. A barrage of deadly, insane techniques crashed into the protective barrier surrounding his body. Jake finally understood how Ruby must have felt when she was used as a punching bag by Laudar and his carnivorous pegasus.

Remembering the move that had worked against his clone, Jake didn't wait for his bracelet to overload before counterattacking. With a thought, he activated two successive layers of Oracle Shields, one deployed at the maximum range of 10m and mercilessly trapped the eagle inside with perfect timing.

The two indestructible energy barriers then smashed against each other at almost instantaneous speed and the Alpha Eagle was flattened like a pancake.

At least, that's what Jake hoped. When he looked at his handiwork, he saw only a single barrier and no trace of blood nor squashed flesh trapped inside. When he gazed into the distance, he saw the Alpha Eagle sweating profusely, but unharmed. His Spiritual Aura had weakened by half and was no more than that of a level 40 native.

"What was this move?" The Eagle Warrior inquired with a shiver of fright. That was close.

"You don't need to know." Jake scowled, trying to hide his disbelief. "On the other hand, I'm really curious to hear how you dodged my trap."

"You don't need to know either." The Alpha Were-Eagle snorted contemptuously. "Such a trump card, I refuse to believe you can use it more than once."

"Then try me." Jake bared his teeth, a defiant glint gleaming in his pupils.

The terrifying Were-being wavered imperceptibly at the sight of his confidence, but the gaping hole in Jake's torso rapidly closing convinced him that it was all a bluff. And still, the scare of that unbreakable compressor trap continued to haunt him.

[Chapter 706 Courage And Recklessness](#)

" Perhaps you're not lying, but all the more reason to kill you." The Alpha Eagle proclaimed resolutely, before turning his head up to give a complicated and apologetic gaze to the White Avian Qewie who was anxiously watching their fight a couple of hundred meters above them.

All of a sudden, the Golden Were-Eagle's aura underwent a radical shift in atmosphere. A demonic presence of boundless savagery and cruelty began to radiate wildly from the half-man, half-beast warrior. The spirit energy fluctuations were so disordered that one would suspect that his whole soul was about to explode.

Then Jake noticed the first change. The Were-Eagle, nearly his size in his non-miniaturized form, experienced a sudden growth spurt, its vast size and wingspan soon covering the Mutant with their gargantuan shadow.

At the same time, its humanoid appearance, which still had vaguely human features, lost all commonality with humanity apart from its bipedalism. Its claws became even longer and sharper, its plumage turned a dark gold, each feather becoming as sleek and cutting as a magic steel blade. His muscles morphed into something grotesque, and dark energy started to seep out of his pores with every exhale.

With each breath cycle, his demonic aura went up a notch, and his composure darkened drastically, as if his consciousness was gradually falling into a berserk state. By the time the demonification was over, the Alpha Were-Eagle had become as massive as a building and its wingspan had become so wide that each random flapping of its wings triggered hurricanes and tornadoes nearing the speed of sound.

Jake obviously tried to stop its transformation with Soul Attacks, wind blades and bullets and even more demanding spells like a laser beam containing 30% of the Aether and energy stored within his cells, but nothing worked. One should know that such a beam could easily cut him in two if he was not prepared.

And so his shock was not faked at all when the laser melted only a few feathers before new ones replaced them, quickly consuming the photonic energy contained in those rays.

Jake responded to the beast's ridiculous display of vitality by further condensing the light particles. If he was only going to make a small hole, he wanted to at least leave a wound on his enemy's body after all his efforts.

He succeeded. At the end of his transformation, the winged monster did have a tiny, coin-width hole in the middle of his forehead, but even with a draft in his brain, the demonic Were-Eagle stoically stood his ground as if he didn't care about his wound. A second later, the hole in his skull closed as if it had never existed.

Jake had expended 30% of his energy for nothing.

Assuming the worst, he took advantage of the monster's stillness to spread his Spirit Body and quickly suck up as much of the surrounding Aether as possible, but how could his enemy let him recover so easily.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jake saw the Shadow Guide hastily reactivate the Oracle Shield and his pupils narrowing with alertness, he followed suit unthinkingly before being hit by a wing flap that struck

him with as much weight and inertia as a large asteroid. Even with the Oracle Shield neutralizing the impact, his body felt it.

Before his brain even grasped what he had just been hit with, his body crashed down just like the meteorite he had pictured right in the middle of the refugee convoy and the Undead army. The shockwave resulted in a blast of such magnitude that the Undeads and innocent survivors were scattered like pollen in the spring, their entire skeletons shattering like twigs.

Indirectly, Jake had killed 90% of the remaining humans with his landing, including the vast majority of the children he and his companions had been trying to keep alive.

Gazing around in a daze, tinnitus from the crash whistling through his skull, Jake recognized Trash's unrecognizable corpse amidst those of other children and a thousand Undeads reduced to rubble. That was the only good thing to come out of this devastating fall.

Farther on, he saw Carmin, as if possessed by rage and grief, fighting like a fiend against a dozen Avians, cooperating with thousands of Undeads, several humans and specters to sap her strength. In one arm she clutched her Blood Energy powered whip, in the other her passed out sister, dried tear streaks running down her makeup.

Her limbless sister Lily had long since slipped into unconsciousness, her baby face completely bloodless and a Death Mark glistening eerily on her forehead. The sea of enemies threatened to overwhelm her at any moment.

Further away, Bhammod and Elduin were fighting back to back against a flood of Undeads, valiantly protecting a bunch of terrified humans with the help of the few Wengol soldiers still alive. They were littered with wounds and their legs and arms were so wobbly they looked like parkinsonians.

The unbearable feeling of helplessness that had been eating away at him since the beginning of the battle completely relapsed and Jake found himself overwhelmed by a suffocating dizziness.

BANG!

With no chance to wallow in his self-centered helplessness, the titanic Were-Eagle trampled him with all its weight with such force and brutality that Jake didn't even have time to conjure up a second Oracle Shield to unleash his compressor trap. The beast had swooped down from the sky, crossing the thousands of meters separating them in an almost instantaneous way.

A new and even more terrible shockwave blew again on the battlefield, but the previous one having already swept and destroyed everything, this one did comparatively less damage.

Pinned to the ground under the monster's enormous claw, Jake pushed on his arms to stand up, and attempted a surprise double Oracle Shields to slice off one of the creature's legs, but no sooner had the thought crossed his mind than the Were-Eagle was already 500 meters away, near the dwarf and the elf.

Without them being able to figure out what was happening to them, the two Rank-A Adventurers were hit by a terrific blast of wind so sharp and powerful that they were hurled into the sky, their fate unknown.

The Were-Eagle stepped forth and its gigantic silhouette flashed away like a mirage, leaving an afterimage before reappearing just behind Carmin, its foot raised. The creature stomped hard and the young woman only owed her life to her vampiric reflexes. In the blink of an eye, she dissolved into a crimson streak of light that magically carried her across 10 kilometers in the blink of an eye.

Feeling no flesh crushed under its talon, the demonic Eagle screeched in anger, then finding no other of Jake's companions nearby began slaughtering the remaining innocents.

"STOP IT!" Jake howled madly, his deafening scream silencing the entire battlefield. Something had just snapped inside him.

He had never been so enraged in his life. He'd felt hatred or the urge to kill before, but on this scale? Never!

Such seething fury, if Jake didn't release it somewhere, he might go nuts forever. The giant Were-Eagle interrupted his slaughter, turning his beak in his direction with eyes filled with malice and contempt.

"If you want to end this madness, stop hiding under your shield and face your death." The monster's thunderous voice pierced the silence, reverberating throughout the plain.

Even Carmin and Ruby, who were far from the convoy, heard his provocation. Inwardly they prayed that he would not respond to the enemy's obvious taunt, but it was too late for Jake. His pride, his ego, his anger had long since reached their breaking point.

"You asked for it." Jake declared coldly, his gaze becoming as icy and unyielding as a predator before its prey.

So what if he died? It was just an Ordeal in the end. Without fear, he turned off his Oracle Shield.

But sometimes, the difference between courage and recklessness was a thin line. As soon as the monster felt the removal of that mysterious energy barrier, he delivered his judgment.

BOOOOOM!

In less than a second, Jake was trampled hundreds of times by a creature weighing dozens of times his own weight and with physical strength immeasurably greater than his own.

Even with Digitization, Jake took heavy damage and splattered the deep crater he was embedded in with his blood and guts. His HP instantly dropped to 0, but oddly enough, the last 0.01 point refused to yield as the Were-Eagle went on a rampage against him.

In a Spirit Body state, Jake beheld the obliteration of his body with chilling detachment. By foolishly responding to the challenge, he had pointlessly hastened his death. Yet oddly, deprived of all the hormones, the cocktail of neurotransmitters affecting his emotions and personality, Jake's Soul in its purest form was filled with a sense of purifying clarity.

His mental turmoil, his doubts, were completely gone. All that remained was a chilling rationality devoted solely to his murderous intent. Examining his opponent intently and thinking fast, he suddenly saw the light.

Even as the Were-Eagle vented its anger on him, Jake suddenly noticed that he had begun to shrink. It was subtle, hard to perceive, but nothing could escape his Perception. Meanwhile, that remaining 0.01HP was still holding on, his HP regen of 82.3 HPs/sec struggling hard to keep it from slipping away completely.

There was also something else in his body that was completely intact: his Oracle Device. Without skipping a beat, Jake summoned his Aether Sun Core ten meters above the bloody mess that was his body, right where his enemy's knee stood.

A high-pitched screech of pain and wrath rippled across the plain as the Were-Eagle hurriedly retreated, leaving a talon behind him.

From the moment Jake was showered with the scorching rays of his artificial sun, his HP regen of 82.3/sec skyrocketed, almost 100-fold.

Within seconds, the biomass splattered and squashed by the enemy coalesced and the outline of a new body took shape as his Spirit once again became one with it.

When less than 30 seconds later, his body finished regenerating, an identical but slightly different Jake reappeared in the center of the crater. As his Myrtharian Eyes rested unblinkingly on the demonified Were-being, a shiver of unbridled terror ran down his spine.

[Chapter 707 I Am](#)

"Good thing I left Jeanie under the Oracle Shield." Jake congratulated himself as soon as he located her body.

It was something he'd discovered on the fly, but by shedding a few grams or kilos of liquid alloy from his Oracle Device, he could remotely set them up and leave instructions to even initiate Oracle Skills if the Aether resources were sufficient.

When a little earlier, Jake had deactivated his Oracle Shield out of fury, he still had the foresight to shelter Jeanie under an Oracle Shield. The little fairy was currently at the bottom of the crater, trapped in a solid chunk of liquid alloy wrapped in a shiny energy barrier. The shield flickered dimly, a testament to the fact that the deluge of blows had nearly depleted the Aether stored inside the metal.

"Jeanie stay hidden there for now." Jake transmitted telepathically into her mind.

The little fairy was startled, yet deeply reassured that he was still alive. When he had locked her in liquid metal with that doomed countenance she had really thought it was game over.

" Well, now it's down to the two of us." Jake gave a low growl as he shot a murderous glare at his tenacious opponent.

Nothing had changed, yet everything was different.

His Bloodline couldn't conveniently level up every time he was in a jam. However, that didn't mean he couldn't get stronger. Once he had Bloodline Ignition, and Aether Conversion activated, what was left to further increase his attributes?

Runes. Or more accurately, Words of Power. If it hadn't been less than 24 hours since he had obtained his Soul Class, he would have long since been able to develop and deduce all sorts of practical applications. But the Ordeal hadn't given him time to do so.

Jake had already been able to ascertain that writing his intentions into the flesh of others worked very well. It was the process by which he had enslaved Ruby by carving the phrase "I am Jake's slave and his will is mine" on her back.

But what if he carved those Runes on himself? If his will, his mental strength, was sufficient, could he transform himself into an invincible warrior god? That was precisely what he intended to find out.

In order to achieve victory no matter what it took, one had to be cruel to one's enemies and even more so to oneself. Having just been pummeled to a pulp by his enemy, it went without saying that Jake didn't mind a few more scars. The catch was to prevent his spontaneous regeneration from healing them too quickly.

In front of a mesmerized Alpha Were-Eagle, Jake envisioned his desire, his intention, then coldly pressed his clawed index finger against his pectoral muscles and began to carve into his flesh the Words of Power conveying his will. At the first line of blood drawn, the severed skin immediately scrambled to fill the void and merge back together, but Jake beat it to the punch by withdrawing the Vitality Aether from the area and intently concentrating on minimizing the local cellular activity.

In less than a second, several inscriptions were etched on his torso, each statement sounding like an ugly display of arrogance.

"I am Strength."

A feeling of infinite strength began to radiate from his entire being, the gravity and weight of his own body fading almost to nothing.

"I am Agility."

His already extremely supple, agile and highly precise body instantly became so flexible that his bones nearly surpassed the flexibility of rubber. His reflexes were also greatly enhanced, giving him a strange sense of control and responsiveness.

"I am Power."

A torrent of energy very different from what those cells and his Aether Core provided gushed from deep within his being, bringing him a pure, dense energy that was preposterously easy to draw upon. With this one, he would have no trouble powering his Heat, Earth and Radiation Spells.

"I am Intelligence."

Time seemed to slow down around him, and that feeling of overwhelming clarity of mind that came with every significant increase in his mental faculties dawned on him again. Jake didn't feel like he was changing all that much, but many ideas flashed through his mind on a sudden burst of insight.

"I am Endurance."

As with intelligence, Jake didn't feel much of a difference. Stamina had always been his forte and with the support of the Aether Sun Core, his body was virtually tireless. Yet his mind could not say the same.

Jake would have gladly carved dozens more proclamations if a splitting headache hadn't suddenly throbbed in his skull, the pain so acute that he momentarily came close to fainting. He could feel his Spirit Body slimming down at a rapid rate, as his will and spirit force were projected into those Words of Power, burning away inexorably.

As his willpower and mental energy were consumed, Jake also felt the flame of his desire dry up, like when a sad person becomes listless after crying too much. This made him realize that his willpower was not unlimited. Without, desire, without willpower, without spirit energy, his Soul would disappear.

"I shall end this fight quickly." Jake muttered under his breath as he tried to ignore his harrowing headache.

The demonic Were-Eagle was taken aback by his pretentious statement. Did he really think he could slay it so quickly? That weird ball of flame was indeed terrifying, but as long as he kept its distance from this fireball it had nothing to fear from this Mutant.

The hitch was that the eagle also had to destroy him as fast as possible. The method he used to transform himself into this gigantic monster was called Daemonification and came from his Soul Class Daemonifier. It was one of the most notorious Soul Classes that Were-beings could unlock and the compatibility with their Bloodline was excellent.

The downside was that like Jake with his Words of Power, the fuel for this daemonification was their Soul, but the transformation also consumed their vitality and Bloodline. Such an exponential gain in power came at a price.

After this fight, the Alpha Were Eagle would need a long rest and would enter a weakened state. As this dark thought occurred to the monster, Jake's disdainful voice suddenly echoed in his mind, sending him into a stupor,

'Don't worry. You'll have plenty of time to relax once I'm done with you.'

That's right, at that moment Jake had managed to read his enemy's thoughts, or rather deduce them from his spiritual fluctuations. It was just a bluff, a gamble, but he had hit the nail on the head. The feeling of being like an open book in front of this Mutant fractured the confident facade that the Were-Eagle had so far managed to uphold.

Taking advantage of his stunned state, Jake teleported unannounced, his Aether Sun Core recalled to the Space Storage. His saber blade suddenly reappeared in his target's heart. Not a few millimeters away, but directly into the enemy's body.

Because of its Daemonification, and the survival technique the Were-Eagle had used to avoid the Oracle Shield's Compressor Trap, its Spirit Body was now barely more vigorous than that of a level 30 native. At the same time, all that fighting had made Jake gain 2 levels, raising his Spirit Body to level 30 as well.

Thanks to his Myrtharian Bloodline, his mind was already 12 times more powerful than normal, and the Intelligence Rune he had carved into his chest had more than tripled his psychic abilities. Breaking into his opponent's spiritual space was now a simple matter.

To the monster, the saber in its heart was like a toothpick, but the disbelief, the horror of realizing that it had been mortally wounded so easily, completely shattered the Were-Eagle's composure.

It had not seen it coming!

With a flutter of its wings, the creature flew a mile or so away, but Jake popped back into its right eye, his blade buried to the hilt in its retina and tingling its optic nerve.

SCREEEEEEEEH!

The rage driven by the giant Were-Eagle's survival instinct exploded all at once, blasts of sharp air beginning to erupt from its being at an extreme frequency. At the same time, its feathers, as sharp and solid as steel, shot out in all directions, forming a continuous and omnidirectional barrage of deadly projectiles. If Jake chose to teleport so dangerously close again, he would be torn apart in an instant, turned into a pincushion.

As if he was afraid of that!

After momentarily pulling back, Jake darted toward the enemy, his body turning into a streak of plasma as elusive as a shooting star. His telekinesis and swift saber parries easily deflected the piercing feathers, the only one that got past his defenses ending up vaporized before it even touched his skin.

The swirling wind blades dancing around the Were-Eagle and defining a no man's land were even less effective than the feather barrage. With his reflexes and perception, Jake dodged the dangerous air streams without hesitation, slipping between them easily before teleporting back into a fleeting gap.

This time it wasn't his saber that got lodged in the eagle's flesh, but his Aether Sun Core that Jake summoned directly into its stomach. This fight had also made him realize that the summoning of his Aether Sun Core could also be used as a weapon. He just wanted to avoid wasting his energy if possible, or worse making it unstable which would lead to its explosion.

But with his new Soul Class, Jake was now confident that he would soon be able to create one on his own and not through the unreliable help of his master Cekt. He could afford to take some risks.

In the span of a few seconds, this game of teleportation, dodging, parrying and punishing assaults was repeated hundreds of times, the Were-Eagle's helpless shrieks of pain echoing across the plain. At the same time, the monster's size continued to decrease as its spiritual aura became more and more erratic.

At long last, six seconds later, the Alpha Were-Eagle, having reverted to human form, collapsed dead on the ground in a puddle of its own blood deep enough to fill a new swimming pool.

[Chapter 708 Reinforcement](#)

Shortly after achieving his victory, Jake began to wobble in the air before collapsing heavily to his knees following a fall of several hundred meters. His Spirit Body was like a candle burning at both ends and the most prominent symptoms were the slowing and radical weakening of his psychic and neural activity.

The other less striking, but equally detrimental symptom was emotional emptiness. Devoid of joy and sorrow, he was in a state of utter mental neutrality that impaired his very drive to do things.

Because of the Digitization, his body also seemed to be at the end of its rope, manifesting the same psychosomatic disorders. Biting his tongue to keep himself awake, Jake didn't let go of his Vitality Aether, which was still preventing those Words of Power from healing away.

"Not yet. I can't relax yet." Jake repeated to himself, thinking about the plight of his companions as he pushed vigorously on the ground with his arms to lift himself up.

He could see in the distance that Carmin had been caught up by the Lich and his Undeads. Several Avians also seemed to be in the mix. The human and spectral reinforcements were nowhere in sight, but their footprints told him definitively that they had gone in the direction of Bhammod and Elduin.

Apparently, being smacked by a giant wing weighing dozens of tons wasn't enough to leave them alone. As for the Undead army, it had begun to retreat after suffering considerable losses due to the collateral damage of his duel with the Alpha Were-Eagle. With his Myrtharian Eyes, he detected their Aetheric signatures scattering in the nearby woods to the northwest, presumably on their way to Laudarkvik.

[You're forgetting about the Lich and his plans.] Xi sighed, urging him to pay attention to a certain corpse behind him. [Even dead, the dwarf and the elf will make excellent recruits for his army.]

Turning in the direction pointed by his AI Oracle, Jake's vision blurred and he staggered several times before recognizing the designated thing. The difficulty in controlling his nervous system as a result of his migraine made the action of moving around a struggle, but he eventually managed to stabilize his mind and regain control of his muscles.

The thing wandering aimlessly and stumbling was none other than Trash Runt. A thing and not a corpse, for his close proximity to their clash of the titans had smashed almost everything that could be smashed, his skeleton reduced to a fine powder. The only reason Jake was able to recognize him was because of the Oracle Scan and the Death Mark faintly glimmering on what was left of his forehead.

"NOOOOOOO!"

Before Jake was once more struck by guilt and remorse, a heartbreaking sob from above him made him twitch. It was a female voice, which should have been pleasant to hear, but grief and anger had made it shrill and trembling.

Hearing several rapid flappings of wings approaching, Jake looked up at the sky above him and caught sight of the earlier White Avian who had been standing back during the fighting. Ignoring it completely, the winged creature swooped down on the now human corpse of the Alpha Were-Eagle and cradled it in its arms, its bird-like face dripping with tears.

Weirdly, though the scene was touching, Jake couldn't find it in himself to sympathize. If they knew what it felt like to lose someone, then why commit all those crimes?

The Alpha Were-Eagle had killed many innocent people and attacked his companions for the sole purpose of provoking him. He had succeeded, but that was the reward he had reaped in return. In fact, if Jake could kill him anew to teach him manners he would gladly play along.

[You're not killing her?] Xi was surprised to see him stagger away from the White Avian and start running.

'I don't have time, and now or later, this bird poses no threat to me.' Jake winced as he gripped his skull from a flare-up of his headache.

[I hope you don't regret it.]

'I won't. If I can't eliminate the Lich and these fake reinforcements from Laudarkvik, the Were-beings will inevitably learn the truth. Killing her isn't worth it, and she wasn't involved in the fighting.'

To reach Carmin and her sister, Jake was forced to sprint the old-fashioned way. Without spiritual energy and severe brain fatigue, using telekinesis and his other powers had become a torture. For this reason, he let the "I am Power" rune fade away with his regeneration. The mental energy drain became more tolerable and he could finally run properly.

Still, even on foot and exhausted, Jake was still as fast as a fighter jet. His very high stride frequency allowed him to cover the distance at a dizzying speed, with mini craters and trails of flame forming in his wake as evidence of his passage.

Obviously, because he was running faster than the speed of sound, Carmin, the Lich and his other foes spotted him long before they heard him. His fighting prowess was so impressive that they never stopped paying attention to him. When they saw him rush in with the same momentum as a stampeding herd of buffalo, the attackers immediately intensified their assault.

Jake, who was not even halfway to the finish line, knew right away by his degree of exhaustion that he would not make it in time. The feeling of helplessness that had overwhelmed him earlier had long since been diluted to nothingness along with his loss of mental power, but he still felt a surge of anger as he watched the Lich impale the young woman with one of his bone-metal spears.

As he considered igniting what was left of his spirit to teleport the remaining distance, he suddenly received a telepathic message he never thought he would ever be happy to hear.

"I'm taking over from here."

As Carmin was suspended in the air and quickly drained of her blood as well as what was left of her life energy, a faint Death Mark beginning to shine through her forehead, a pillar of crimson light suddenly smote the earth like a divine punishment. The Avians and Undeads who were enveloped by the pillar of blood light immediately began to emit bloodcurdling screams and wails.

As the pillar of light disappeared, a blond handsome man with red eyes and wielding a ruby-encrusted sword with a scarlet blade appeared in the dead center of the battlefield. His pale, flawless face was contorted with rage, an unparalleled ferocity and malice emanating from his entire being.

How could Jake not recognize that appearance? It was the Wyatt Griffiths he had duelled with at the end of his Third Ordeal. Back then, they were enemies, but this time they were on the same side.

Ironically, his face looked even more fiendish and cruel than it had under the effect of Corruption. By picking on Carmin and Lily in this way, the Lich had probably touched his reverse scale.

"It looks like I did the right thing coming here." The Vampire Progenitor said in a low voice, a sinister glow pulsing in his pupils. Turning to the Lich and his acolytes, he inquired in a soft voice that gave them goosebumps,

"Who hurt those two women?"

"Who are y-"

One of the Avians, a bird with a long stork neck and covered in piercings, tried to question him arrogantly in turn, but before he even finished his sentence, his body liquefied into a pool of blood.

Seeing the gory, searing death of their comrade, a horrified expression froze the faces of the remaining Avians.

"Retreat!"

One of the Were-birds sounded the retreat with a screech, but no sooner had he finished uttering the word than his head rolled to the ground, forever detached from his neck. This second kill finally caused panic among the attackers, and the Avians scattered in the air in all directions as if being preyed upon by their natural predator.

As for the Lich who had orchestrated the whole drama that had taken place here, he gave the Vampire Progenitor who had just arrived a meaningful look, lingering briefly on the bracelet hidden under his wrist before flying backwards cackling dismissively.

" It is only postponed. " The Lich's husky, drawling voice echoed across the plain, mingling with the cries of Avians and Undeads.

Wyatt could tell the leader from his minions, and he bolted after the Lich. Sneering in contempt, the necromancer monster snapped his fingers and hundreds of Undeads, including Urzul, the human commander, and Wengol great general popped up out of nowhere, blocking the Vampire's path.

While Wyatt engaged the Undeads, Jake, who was on the other side, did not miss the action and squinted darkly as he watched the Lich retreat in his direction. Gauging his remaining strength, he estimated that he still had enough energy for one more attack.

Setting his Spirit Body ablaze, Jake locked his gaze on his target and teleported straight at it, pulling off the perfect ambush. The Lich may have had his own Oracle Device, but he obviously wasn't expecting such a surprise attack, or his rank was lower than his own.

Jake's white-hot saber blade chopped down savagely at the necromancer, and the Lich's defensive bone growths that had so easily killed Urzul were atomized. The blow sliced deep into the monster's flesh, but Jake felt like he was slicing through a wall of adamantium.

Despite the resistance, he gritted his teeth and tensed his muscles furiously, and the blade sliced through the enemy's body with one swipe before exiting through his crotch with a lightsaber sound.

Plop.

The necromancer's body split in two, and the two smoking halves fell to the ground with a thud. The Lich had been obliterated.

Chapter 709: A Peculiar Lich

When Jake leaned over to admire his handiwork, a stinging pain made him drop hard to his knees. Clutching his skull with both hands, he convulsed on the floor despite his iron will.

Wyatt, who had just finished disposing of the last Undeads summoned, stared at him with a peculiar expression but was not overly concerned. Still, it was fortunate that they were on the same side, for if the Vampire had any ill intentions towards him he could easily have taken his life.

Momentarily slipping in and out of consciousness, Jake's tight control over his Aether of Vitality and his cells loosened completely, much like a horse being let go of its reins. The Words of Power etched into his flesh instantly dissolved.

It was only after the Runes were completely erased that Jake finally stopped convulsing like an epileptic. Knowing that he would fall into a deep, restorative sleep if he succumbed to temptation, he gritted his teeth and gathered what was left of his willpower to get up with a grunt.

"Are you okay?" Wyatt asked in a genuinely concerned tone upon seeing him so haggard. It was hard to imagine coming from this tireless thug.

"I'm fine. Just my Spirit Body that's been overdrawn." Jake replied evasively, brushing off his concern. He still didn't trust this Vampire. Changing the subject, he asked, "How are Carmin and Lily?"

The blond man clouded over as he heard his question. Gently setting the two young women down on the grass in front of him, he examined them carefully and a tear of rage silently rolled down his face.

"Carmin will be fine if she gets a blood transfer. For Lily... It's already too late. Her mind is already gone."

Jake closed his eyes and let out a crestfallen, dispirited sigh upon hearing the sad news. During this mission, ironically, their first two victims had been the only children on the team. Trash was a stranger to them a day earlier, but Lily was Carmin's darling little sister.

She had failed to protect her during the Third Ordeal, and this time, the kid had been culled within hours of their arrival on Quanoth. How many of them would make it to the end?

"Quanoth is the staging ground for the previous Ordeal finalists." Wyatt grimaced, his face sullen. He blamed himself for this. "If I'd known it would turn out this way, I never would have allowed them to come."

Jake nodded mechanically like a robot, his mind completely blank. He hadn't caught up with his companions since his breakfast at Lodunvals. It had already been over 12 hours. Perhaps many of them had already been killed in similar tragedies.

At that moment, Jake and Wyatt felt they were on the same page. They shared the same responsibility, the same burden. As they looked at each other, the thoughts running through their minds were of the same ilk:

'I need to get stronger, but I also need companions who can keep up with me.'

Lily, Carmin's sister, had been eliminated in the last two Ordeals. The Fifth was known for its extraordinarily high death rate, so there was no reason to imagine that she would fare any better in the next Ordeal. For the young Blood Human, the adventure ended there. Neither Wyatt nor her sister would allow her to participate in such a dangerous Ordeal with no safety net.

As for the Myrtharian Nerds, Jake knew he had to prepare himself mentally to make similar resolutions. His longtime companions, Will, the two sisters, Kyle, Sarah... With the exception of Enya, all of them had died at least once in the previous three Ordeals.

Looking only at the last Ordeal, only the two sisters and Kyle had lasted to the end. But considering Kyle's circumstances... Jake preferred not to get his hopes up too high or he would be left sorely disappointed in the future.

[Don't be so defeatist.] Xi tried to console him, but when she saw that it didn't work, she spoke more harshly. [Trust them, but be pragmatic. You must not compromise your Ordeal to protect them. Your interests may serve theirs, but even if they don't, they are your subordinates. You must accept the idea that they may die following your orders. There is no such thing as zero risk.]

"I know... Only those who survive this Ordeal, regardless of the reasons, will be granted permission to accompany me on my Fifth Ordeal." Jake had made his decision.

He then returned to the Lich's bisected corpse and lifted its hood, revealing a pristine white face with the smooth, slightly reflective sheen of a luxury car shell. An android.

Jake had met a similar person before: Siri, Cekt's third disciple on B842. If he remembered correctly, the android species she belonged to was called the Delcrons.

Tearing off the rest of its cloak, Jake was able to determine that it was indeed a cybernetic life form and not just a cyborg with a few enhancements. He barely managed to hide his astonishment. A robot Lich. The Mirror Universe never ceased to amaze him.

From a strictly physical point of view, the electrical activity of a processor was not so different from that of a neural network. These Delcrons, whether they were natural androids or created by someone, could feel things and develop a Soul and Spirit Body just like everyone else.

What was strange however, was that traditionally a Lich was a deceased mage who had returned from the dead. It often took a lot of preparation to transition from a normal mage to an immortal Lich and their appearance was often gaunt and rotten like a mummy or reduced to a skeleton.

The original brain had long since disintegrated and it finally came down to a kind of possession. A Lich was ultimately a spirit inhabiting a body designed or chosen specifically to become its vessel.

In this case, what about this Delcron's "brain"?

Jake dug his fingers into the Lich's metal skull, then yanked hard on both sides to split its skull open. Inside, he discovered a tapered structure that should be the equivalent of a motherboard and data storage device, but it was completely blackened as if it had fried.

"So this Delcron guy was well and truly dead. Or did he choose to kill himself to become a Lich?" Jake shook his head.

As he fumbled around in his cranium, his eye was suddenly drawn to a small crystalline bulge in the back of the spindly structure. Unlike the latter, it still emitted a faint greenish light reminiscent of an LED.

"It looks like some kind of tracking device or transmitter." Jake muttered warily.

As he wondered what exactly this device was, Jake suddenly remembered that he still didn't know what had happened to Bhammod and Elduin. The dwarf and elf had been slapped hard by the Daemonified Were-Eagle's wing and blown extremely far away. Human and Astral reinforcements had departed in their direction several minutes ago.

"I gotta go. I have two more companions to rescue." Jake excused himself restlessly as he stored the Lich's carcass in his Space Storage before sprinting away like a demon.

Wyatt frowned, but after dropping Carmin and Lily off near a tree out of sight, he slit his wrist and let a trickle of fresh blood flow into the fainted young woman's parted lips. When her pale face regained some color, he licked his finger and ran it over his wrist to close the wound. The saliva of all Vampires had hemostatic properties.

After that, he ran in Jake's direction, a burst of Blood Energy increasing his speed explosively. Jake was caught up in an instant, but considering his current physical condition it wasn't a feat worth bragging about.

Once he was next to Jake, Wyatt slowed his running pace to match his rival's. Two minutes later, they heard the clash of weapons and shouting and knew they had arrived at the right place.

Cornered at the foot of a cliff, where a three-foot deep human-shaped depression had formed a couple of dozen meters off the ground, the two Players recognized Elduin fighting like a madman with his two scimitars against a group of hostile men and specters. Their jeers appeared to be taunting the elf, reveling in his vain resistance.

Bhammod lay unconscious a few feet away, his condition unknown. Jake couldn't help but notice that the crater in the cliff was beautifully shaped to match the dwarf. In addition to taking the winged slap from the Were-Eagle, he had apparently also taken responsibility for the landing.

No wonder Elduin was still unharmed. Having himself a cousin with a Water Elf bloodline, he knew that all elves were endowed with supernatural lightness. If they pushed their elven agility to the extreme they could even run on air and surf on gentle breezes.

The elf was currently in the middle of a duel to the death against a bearded human warrior, with questionable hygiene and wearing an eye patch. Despite his filthy tank top and mud-stained pants and boots, his attacker was a formidable swordsman. Elduin, who was a Rank-A Adventurer, held no advantage.

It was quite clear that if they had joined forces, they could have defeated him easily, but these humans and specters seemed to want to torment him a little longer for the sole purpose of entertainment.

With a glance, Jake assessed the level of each of these warriors. 7 humans, 5 specters. Their levels ranged from 57 to 71. The specters were weaker, rarely exceeding level 30, but their purpose was not to fight on the front lines but to facilitate recon and communication on the battlefield.

Jake and Wyatt exchanged glances and a murderous glint flashed across their faces.

"Kill!!"

Chapter 710: There's Still Someone

Far from the battlefield, in an austere room with virtually no light except for a foul-smelling candle about to go out, two greenish flames suddenly flared up in the darkness, revealing ancient, cobwebbed furniture.

Like the fuse of a firecracker setting off a chain explosion, hundreds of additional pairs of burning flames lit up the darkness, like a night sky filling with stars. The dim but constant light produced by these flames combined until it was more than bright enough to clearly discern every detail of the room.

Hundreds of identical figures were revealed one by one, standing in motionless, mute rows behind the one in front, who owned the first two flames. Each figure was hooded and their faces were inexpressive, pale white and as stiff and smooth as plastic.

When the first figure to awaken rose, the two emerald flames rose with it. Those creepy flames were obviously its eyes.

"My C-52 clone is dead." It murmured with a hint of bewilderment. "Data recovery."

The flames shimmering in its empty sockets flickered compulsively for several seconds before regaining their stability.

"It's a vexing twist, but the bulk of the Undead army is safe. The plan can be considered a success." The android Delcron laughed peacefully. "Hmm?"

A notification popped into its mind, informing it of an attempted communication.

"Are you on your way back?" The Lich questioned apathetically. "Anything unusual happened? Excellent. I'll wait for you you know where. See you later."

A few minutes later, two men sporting a hefty Oracle Device stepped fearlessly into the spooky room. The man on the left was an intimidating warrior over 3 meters tall, with a bushy mane and beard, sharp eyes, overbearing musculature and an electric aura. His distinctive feature was the red tattooed stripes vertically crossing his torso and face.

The man on the right was significantly smaller, but his orange eyes with slit pupils were brimming with such cruelty and malice that his Viking buddy looked like an innocent child. He too had lost his coat and was walking around shirtless, a dagger in his belt and a huge bloodstained saw slung across his back.

A cracking sound suddenly pierced the chilling silence and as he lifted his boot the taller of the two men discovered a crushed child's skull beneath it. Sweeping the dusty room with his piercing eyes, he saw thousands of corpses and bones piled together in varying degrees of decay.

"Your hobbies are still as disgusting as ever." The warrior spat in a scathing voice. "If I hadn't learned the hard way that this is impossible, I'd kill you with my own hands."

The Delcron necromancer chuckled lightly at the thinly veiled threat,

"Please, keep trying Azeus. But you have everything to lose and nothing to gain by provoking us. Isn't that right Shamash? Unless my hobbies bother you too?"

The man named Shamash replied by throwing the dagger at his belt right between the android's eyes. He had drawn it so fast that the Lich had no time to react.

The damaged android began to sizzle, then the two flames floating in its sockets flickered a few times before fizzling out altogether. The Player recalled his dagger magically as he reached out and growled in contempt,

"Don't threaten me, Vhoskaud. You're not worthy."

Compared to his partner Azeus, Shamash didn't seem to be burdened with the same concerns.

Faced with the unexpected death of one of their own, the other identical androids remained unmoved, but their mouths opened in unison as they began to speak in a robotic voice.

"You may be a genuine member of Lost Divinities, but a false god does not have what it takes to threaten my Death Legion. Not to mention the fact that my Replicators faction is not inferior to yours and I am not the only member currently mobilized on Quanoth. Think carefully before you burn all bridges.

A terrible killing intent gushed forth from the Player Shamash, but the android Liches remained totally unfazed, brushing it off effortlessly. When the killing pressure receded, Vhoskaud then asked in a feverish mood, burning with excitement as it rubbed its hands together,

"So. Where is the corpse?"

Shamash rolled his eyes, but still gave a head nod to his partner, who materialized the corpse stored in his Space Storage. Carelessly tossing the corpse of a mutilated middle-aged man in front of the Lich army, Azeus growled coldly,

"This is the test subject you wanted. This is the Mutant that has been giving us such a hard time."

One of the androids stepped out of the rows and proceeded to orderly check the corpse's condition, checking every bit of its body, from its tongue to its missing genitals before ranting,

"Where is the missing organ?!"

"Destroyed during the fight." Azeus spat out while surreptitiously pointing at Shamash with his eyes. His partner's sadistic practices sickened him almost as much as this Lich's macabre hobbies.

The android Vhoskaud read through its Oracle Scan report and concluded placidly,

"Norton, a level 78 Ape-Daemon mutant. We had no information on him, except that he is one of the founding members of the Mutant Faction with Aisling. It seems we underestimated the forces in Laudarkvik. Even without Aisling, this Mutant Faction obviously still has plenty of teeth. In that case, the other factions must be even more formidable. It's troublesome news, but the mission was a success and I gained a new guinea pig."

Then the Lich waved its hand and shoed them away without a second glance, its mind already elsewhere, immersed in the corpse of the deceased Norton.

"You may go."

The two men quivered with anger, a murderous gleam in their eyes, but with an ear-splitting snort they withdrew, leaving to carry out their next mission.

Shling!

A spray of blood painted the crumbling cliff and the last human's head rolled to the ground. Jake kicked it furiously, shooting it into space. The last specter's wail of agony rang out at the same time and a puddle of ectoplasm dripped onto the fluid-soaked grass.

"Phew... That was the last one." Wyatt exhaled tiredly. His usually perfectly waxed and styled hair was now a mess and stained with blood.

Both Jake and the Vampire Progenitor were drenched in sweat, their chests heaving rapidly despite their insane stamina and vitality. Both had been injured multiple times during the fight, but their unparalleled regeneration had prevailed.

If Jake had not drawn on Xion Zolvhur's Soul Stone to restore his Spirit Body on the way, the fight would have been even more difficult. After all those times of using it, the stone hadn't shrunk a bit. Fortunately, with the help of Wyatt who was in his best shape, the victory had quickly tipped in their favor. The elf Elduin had also participated to the best of his ability to assist them.

"How is Bhammod?" Jake inquired, praying he wouldn't lose a new comrade.

"Hmmp! That drunken dwarf is a tough cookie. I gave him my last precious elixir..." Elduin winced as he kicked the sleeping dwarf before mellowing. "If you hadn't arrived in time, it would have been dangerous."

Jake volunteered to carry the unconscious dwarf back and the trio quickly returned near the convoy to where Carmin and her sister had been hiding. When they arrived, they saw that Carmin had already regained consciousness and was weeping bitterly as she cradled her sister's lifeless body.

Their hearts sank as they witnessed the scene, but neither of them could find anything adequate or soothing to say. In the end, they let her cry her eyes out, but when it didn't look like it was going to stop, Jake walked over to her and blurted out,

"She's not dead. Stop crying."

She glared at him, but strangely enough, stating the obvious did the trick. She wiped away her tears and stored her sister's body in her bracelet to keep it safe until it was gone. Jake had never witnessed the phenomenon in person, but the Players' bodies would disappear after a few hours.

Without this measure, eliminated Players would be forced to go into debt to generate a new identical body from scratch. At least in this case they only had to restore the damaged areas.

This made him realize, though, that many Players, including his comrades, had had a close call. If their bodies had been immediately eaten, incinerated or chopped up by their enemies during their First Ordeal, the healing bill would have been prohibitive.

Jake then returned with his group to the convoy and was shocked to discover that no one was left. Not a single corpse, not a single survivor. After all the Wengol refugees and soldiers had been wiped out, their Death Mark had activated and they had joined the ranks of the Undead army before scattering into the woods.

"I see someone." Elduin suddenly shouted after perching on top of an overturned carriage.

Jake and the others were taken aback, but as they ran in the direction indicated they did spot a childlike figure wandering aimlessly in the middle of the plain. As they got closer, Jake and the others recognized this Undead and were completely shocked.

"Trash?"