

## Oracle 681

### [Chapter 681 Nothing At All](#)

The monster woman was captured and brought back bound and chained several minutes later. Several riders were missing from the initial troop in pursuit.

She was still in her half-human, half-beast form and the sight was just sickening. Although its greenish fur was caked with dried human blood, the rage-ridden creature appeared utterly incapable of coherent thinking and only snarled and bared its teeth whenever anyone got too close.

In this state, the humanoid monster did not resemble any known Earth beast. The claws, tail, and fur might suggest a large grizzly bear, but its lack of a nose, six bulging red eyes, and three moss-covered antlers spreading out like a fan on either side of its skull disputed this.

This elderly woman, who was in fact only about forty years old, was neither a Werewolf nor a Werebear, but was indeed a Were-being.

'What species is this?' Jake asked Xi to save a scan.

[A Wendigak, a variant of Wendigo.] She answered concisely after consulting the Oracle System.

Her Oracle AI transferred to him whatever data she had on the topic, and Jake immediately learned what he needed to know about these evil creatures. The genesis of these creatures varied from world to world, but according to the theory of evolutionary convergence, similar species from two different worlds were very likely to have emerged for similar reasons.

In reality, the Oraclean had a word for every idea and concept. The Mirror Universe was so vast that every idea, thing ever imagined by a human or any other creature had to exist somewhere. It was the same premise that justified the presence of so many human subspecies throughout the Mirror Universe, not just on Earth.

Speaking of Earth, if we look at ancient mythology, the Wendigos came from a North American myth and were reputed to be a breed of humans who became so after falling into cannibalism or after being possessed by a demonic spirit or surviving the bite of one. No one knew what the exact trigger was, but unlike Werewolves or Vampires, Wendigos were considered inherently evil, with no hope of redemption.

In the rest of the Mirror Universe, it was pretty much the same story. Wendigos and all their variants were always a civilized non-cannibal species that had committed this taboo at some point, then derived pleasure from the act and kept repeating the deed until they turned into one of these monsters. The catalyst could have been the influence of a spirit demon, Aether, dark magic, an Aether Spell, or even the awakening of a Soul Class. In truth, it didn't really matter what it was.

What was important was that once transformed, their thirst for human flesh surpassed all else and they became unable to derive pleasure from any other food or activity. Those with strong ideals and willpower could resist this hunger for decades, even centuries before giving in. The catch was that Wendigos would regurgitate any food that was different from their native species prior to transformation, becoming incapable of sustaining themselves.

In other words, any Wendigos still alive after a few months had inevitably given in to their instincts.

"Thank goodness I didn't have to pick that Bloodline after my First Ordeal." Jake shuddered in dread at the thought.

As he watched the monster being hoisted onto the scaffold, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of compassion for this mother who was most likely just a victim who didn't ask for any of it. Her only sin was to have somehow survived the attack of a Wendigak.

The throngs of villagers gathered excitedly around the execution site and Jake and his companions followed without enthusiasm. Her son, who had cleared his name, was numb with horror and was well on his way to developing some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder.

"Why is the executioner heating the blade of his sword?" Trash asked curiously as he saw the same shaggy man with yellow eyes muttering a fire spell.

The man wearing only a faded black suit and a threadbare frock coat had questionable hygiene, but no guard dared to utter a squeak in his presence. The fierce predatory glint in his golden eyes and his grime-blackened clawed nails were all the man needed to command respect.

He was a representative of the Were-beings.

"Because the Wendigaks can only be killed by melting their ice hearts." Jake eventually answered the orphan's query with a scholarly look when he had just learned this information himself seconds earlier. "Otherwise, even decapitated or chopped in half, their spirits come back to life after a while and infect someone else."

Ruby gave him a snarky look as if to scoff at his shamelessness, but she remained silent. Of course, the other natives didn't notice.

"Oh, so that's how we kill them..." Elduin marveled as he banged his fists together. "No wonder the one we killed three years ago came back to attack us every night for a week after we cut him out the first time. It was only by cremating it that we solved the problem for good."

"Ah, I remember that one." Bhammod grunted gruffly. "We lost a good man to that scum."

"Well, now you know how to kill one." Ruby sneered as she crossed her arms.

"I'd rather know how to kill you, bitch!" The elf vilified her bluntly.

"Hey, be nice to each other." The little fairy pouted adorably as she flitted between them.

However, meeting Ruby's emotionless gaze sapped all her courage and she flew back to hide in Jake's mantle pocket.

"That girl is not a good egg." Jeanie muttered inaudibly, her mind relapsing into its paranoid whims. Unfortunately, this time her fears were well founded.

When the yellow-eyed man's white-hot sword was finally plunged into the heart of the Wendigak woman, a blood-curdling howl of agony ended the crowd's whispers, and sizzling sounds, followed by

the boiling of water, together formed a symphony of suffering that would mark the minds of the onlookers forever.

When the steam ceased to flow out of the monster's perforated chest, the executioner withdrew his blade, fully cooled, and sheathed it indifferently in its sheath. The executed woman had regained her human appearance and one would have thought she was sleeping peacefully if not for the gaping hole where her heart had been.

"Bury her." The Were-beings representative ordered wearily. "If the son behaves suspiciously or seeks revenge. Kill him on the spot."

" Understood."

" By your command, Sir Raulf." The guards quickly bowed to reaffirm their allegiance.

As the crowd of villagers dispersed, Jake nudged Ruby, who at that moment was playing the role of a beautiful, innocent young woman. From the point of view of the other villagers, they could easily have believed that she was his slave or that he was mistreating her. Well, that was close enough to the truth...

"Hey Ruby, doesn't it bother you to see an ordinary woman lose her life like that because of instincts she is powerless to suppress?" He teased her snidely after getting her attention.

She turned her head in another direction and snubbed him. The corner of Jake's lip curled up to sketch a triumphant smirk and he commanded,

"Answer the question."

Constrained by the Slave Contract, Ruby persisted in avoiding his gaze but answered honestly through gritted teeth,

"Nothing at all. I...don't...feel...anything...at all."

Jake frowned.

"Look at me." He ordered coldly.

Before she could comply, he teleported in front of her and had time to catch the silver glow pulsating in her pupils. It was instantly dispelled, but it was too late. Seeing this, he sneered disdainfully.

"You thought I wouldn't notice you using your Digestor part to resist. That means you're lying. No need to ask again. I have my answer." Jake said with his back to her.

'I'm lying?' Ruby repeated in her head, raising a confused eyebrow.

She didn't feel like she was lying. It was what she truly thought, but at the same time she didn't feel like she was being totally honest either. It was hard to describe, but at that very moment she had spoken from the heart.

Suddenly, a demonic smile flashed across her angelic face, before immediately dropping away.

'I did lie, Jake. I was not unmoved by that woman's death. I felt a sadistic and jubilant pleasure in watching her death. I would have liked her to suffer a thousand times more before perishing, but the icing on the cake would have been that her executioner was then sentenced to death too for the same crime and tortured in the same way. He too is a monster. I can see it in his eyes. You too, Jake, are a monster. Your indifference gives you away. We are all monsters.'

'Even those ordinary villagers who live in terror are monsters. They may not be cannibals, but they sell their brothers and sisters for a pittance, stab each other for a handful of silver coins, \*\*\*\*, hurt and steal to drown their despair, and are willing to kill to receive a Vampire's Embrace or a Were-being's bite if it allows them to escape their miserable, hopeless lives. How could all these miasmas and evil spirits come into being if all these people were innocent? How can I be indifferent when a woman has just been punished for something she can't control, while everyone else is sinning knowingly?'

'Hypocrisy and weakness, that's what needs to be punished.'

### [Chapter 682 Some Things Never Changes](#)

'Did you record that?' Jake asked Xi mentally.

[It's in the can.] She chuckled proudly.

Jake didn't have eyes in the back of his head yet, but equipping a micro camera wasn't complicated. All he had to do was give a smartphone to scan to an Oracle Device and it would replicate its functions with its liquid alloy.

If the local network conditions allowed it, it could easily make a phone call or connect to the Internet. Taking a picture or a video was only a bonus.

At the moment, his Oracle Device had perfectly recorded the micro-expression change on Ruby's face. He studied the cruel smirk on her face and the silvery glimmer burning in her pupils and shook his head with slight disappointment.

'It seems I can't trust her. The Slave Contract works, but this Digestor half is a genuine sword of damocles.'

[As long as you stay alert, you have nothing to worry about.] Xi qualified this with a reassuring tone. [She has no more Aether. Even if she manages to hide an artifact somehow, as long as you don't let her replenish her Aether, she'll be like a tiger with no teeth and claws.]

'In that case, perhaps I should gently coax her to offer me her stash of liquid alloy.' Jake gave a grudging smile. 'That way, her passive Aether output will be reduced accordingly and the power of her Oracle Skills will be impacted.'

[That may be a good idea.] The Oracle AI approved his plan. [But keep in mind, a hopeless slave is not necessarily a good slave. If you take everything from her, you won't be in a position to free her once the Ordeal is over. The Digestor part of her is growing rapidly. Right now, she's like a time bomb. You don't know when it's going to blow up, but it's going to blow up sooner or later, I can assure you.]

'There's no way to help her?' Jake clouded over as he listened to Xi's pessimistic prediction.

In asking this question, it was not only pity or compassion that motivated him, but also the fear of one day finding himself in the very same plight. The Third Ordeal was designed precisely to subject them to an ersatz Corruption. He knew how difficult it was to stay true to oneself under its influence.

[Not that I know of.] Xi sighed. [If it were just the Corruption, I'd say that if you strengthen your mind and your True Will faster than it corrupts you, you have a good chance of staying yourself. For Trojan Digestors like Ruby, the Digestor and Ruby's soul have long since merged and become one. As Ruby's soul grows stronger, her Digestor part inevitably grows stronger too. She is half Digestor through and through. When Corruption influences you, you may feel like you are not acting like yourself, but in Ruby's case, even if she realizes the abnormality, she will have a strong sense that the thought is coming from her. Even if she awakens her True Will, chances are that the memories, people, ideals, and values she holds dear are not as noble and benevolent as one might expect from a young woman her age.]

As Jake and his group made their way to the next village, he remained absorbed in his thoughts the entire way. Ruby's circumstances were a bit like that of a depressed, stoned, alcoholic, sick, debt-ridden addict. No matter how much she wanted to overcome it or turn a new leaf, it was virtually impossible for her to change on her own. She needed outside intervention.

Unfortunately, at his present level Jake couldn't help her. He could only prevent her from committing further perjury and crimes that she might eventually come to regret.

What was definite, though, was that Ruby had already been ostracized by the rest of the group. Elduin and Bhammod hated her with all their guts, Jeanie was scared of her and Trash felt uncomfortable walking in front of her. Feeling her cold gaze on his back made the hairs on his neck stand on end and he had hurriedly moved closer to the two Rank-A Adventurers to feel safer.

In the late afternoon, the high, soot-black stone wall of Laudarkvik finally rose before them, and the rest of the group, except for Jake and Ruby, gulped as they caught a glimpse of the huge, dark towers fading into the clouds.

It wasn't all that impressive, to be quite frank. The clouds were rolling down to about 500 meters from the ground and a veil of ordinary fog had completely engulfed the city. As their group had been taking their time to scout the region, the brief day of sunshine had already ended and it was now pitch black.

The natives in their group couldn't see much beyond the gigantic wall studded with huge ballistas, trebuchets, and even magic cannons, but Jake found it easy to get a 3D model of the city by scanning it. Even without his Oracle Device, his keen vision had no trouble discerning the many castles in the distance.

Laudarkvik was a huge city-state with almost 100 million inhabitants. Almost ten times more populated than Lodunvals, whose population was scattered in many villages and towns under its jurisdiction before the war.

The reason why Laudarkvik was so populated and its wall so secure was obviously because this huge impregnable city also acted as an enclosure. Of these 100M residents, over 99.5 million were ordinary humans. The remaining 500,000 belonged to the various supernatural races making up the eight main factions.

BOOOOOOOH!

"Kya!!! A ghost!" Jeanie let out a shrill scream of fright as she felt something chilling brush against her.

Trash, and the two adventurers didn't notice anything until the teenager also began to shudder. His legs began to shake and he felt his eyelids grow heavy.

"Why am I so cold?" He asked as he shivered.

"Hmmp!" Jake snorted as he grabbed a translucent ghost stuck like an octopus to the orphan's leg by its throat.

The spirit didn't even try to resist and was clearly stunned when the hand closed like a vise around its neck. Jake's spirit body swelled around his hand like a glove of superheated energy and the spirit let out a shrill wail before evaporating into smoke. A fluorescent green puddle dripped to the floor.

"Ectoplasm!" Jeanie exclaimed as she scooped up the substance in her hands.

"You couldn't see it?" Jake scolded them harshly as he saw how easily they had been fooled. Trash was one thing, but Elduin and Bhammod were supposed to be renowned adventurers.

"See what?" The dwarf groused in a bad mood. It had been over an hour since he finished his last beer.

"The ghost." Jake replied curtly, pointing to the fluorescent puddle at his feet.

A flicker of realization crossed the two adventurers' faces.

"That was Tilla and Jakmi dealing with those supernatural threats..." The elf apologized with a forlorn look.

Jake did not insist. From the murderous glare he had just cast at Ruby, he could imagine what had happened to those two mages. He didn't know who those two were exactly, but what he did know for sure was that everyone he had trapped with Ruby and Laudar was dead except for them.

"Seeing ghosts is not complicated if you know how to use your extrasensory perception." Jake voiced his puzzlement. "At your level, it should be a piece of cake."

"Well, we can't." Bhammod shrugged. "The way you Guilties use your mental power to scan your surroundings is not automatically available to us. Only those with innate talent or an appropriate Soul Class can use it."

Jake immediately understood what he was getting at. To awaken the Seventh Aether Stat, it had taken a trigger, the emergence of his Proto-Soul. It happened when his Aether Intelligence and Perception had exceeded 30 in the world of his First Ordeal, where the Aether density was only 8.

He used to think it was the same for everyone, but now he knew that it was very Aether density dependent. On Quanoth, the Aether density and Aether stats of its inhabitants were set at 1000 and no training or remedy could break that cap. If the Seventh Stat was not awakened at birth, it was wishful thinking to count on a miracle.

Trash, for example, had an Extrasensory Perception of zero. He probably wasn't destined to be a mage.

That made the Blue Minmins of Intelligence like Jeanie even more valuable. By devouring them, the intelligence gain was global, affecting both the Aetheric, physical and spiritual aspects. Even if their

Aether stats would remain suppressed as Jake's currently were, such a massive intelligence boost was a near guarantee of awakening that Seventh Stat.

"In that case, Trash stay close to me." Jake cautioned. "You two have nothing to fear from these weak ghosts, but Trash can't claim the same."

Jake wore a sour face as he gazed at the huge portcullis blocking their path to Laudarkvik. They hadn't even formally entered the city yet, and a wandering ghost was already treating them like its lunchbox.

Jeanie snuggled back into her pocket after collecting the ectoplasma in a vial larger than herself. Jake peered at the substance, but quickly lost interest as he realized that this city was infested with spirits and that this would certainly not be their only run-in with these ghosts.

Their group calmly crossed the bridge, glad they didn't have to wait in line. Once night fell, the humans seemed to obey some sort of curfew. Unless they were too terrified to leave their homes?

Arriving at the lowered portcullis, a gray werewolf in armor nearly ten feet tall, a Draugh, and a Wight wearing the same uniform blocked their way.

"Your papers!"

Whether it was Lodunvals or Laudarkvik, some things never changed.

### [Chapter 683 Following The Plan](#)

These three guards did not seem to be on good terms with each other. The gray armored werewolf never showed his back to the two Undeads and they refused to budge when he ordered them to retrieve their ID cards. Only after an ominous throaty growl did the Draugh stumble heavily toward them to do his job.

"Paaapeers." The humanoid creature articulated with difficulty in a sluggish voice.

This one was clearly a tile short of a roof but his temper was atrocious. Whoever had the awful idea of posting it here was either a genius or a terminal moron.

According to the Oracle System, the primeval Draughs were corpses of warriors who had come back to life to defend their graves. Their decomposition was advanced, but they had mutated to be larger and more massive than their original bodies. They were most often created by someone else or a special energy and could only be killed by scattering their ashes to the four winds. This type of Undead was cursed and could usually be exorcised by forcing them back to sleep in their graves.

'Ugh, I feel like these buggers are going to be a pain to deal with...' Jake cringed inwardly as he handed over his identity and adventurer's card.

With a unnerving slowness and clumsiness, the Draugh guard retrieved their ID cards one by one, then with an awkward gait he lumbered back to his fellow Wight and entrusted the cards to him in lieu of the gray werewolf, who was supposed to be their superior.

The werewolf captain let out a disgruntled snort, but the Wight had already collected the ID cards and started swiping them against the magic device that looked like a large prismatic brick.

The Wight was much sharper and more deft than the other Undead, but his appearance was just as hideous. When he was alive, he had been a dark-haired man of about 185 cm, but his decomposition was already well advanced and his skin was so shriveled, that one could see his empty eye sockets and the yellow skeleton beneath.

A Wight was also an Undead crawling out of graves or cemeteries, but they had a territorial nature and were able to wake up other dead monsters, beasts or humans to form their own small army. Some people referred to them as special ghosts even though they had physical bodies. In terms of threat, these Undeads were a calamity ten times worse than the Draughts, but were vulnerable to silver.

Knowing all this, Jake calmly watched the movements of these two Undeads. Sniffing the air, he didn't smell any rot. Despite their repulsive appearance, these two Undeads were clean.

The Wight swiped the ID cards one by one with his gaunt fingers while clicking his jaws non-stop until he froze reading Ruby's data. The Undead shuddered involuntarily, reluctant to share the result with his superior.

Bad luck for him, the werewolf was already in a foul mood and with a shove sent him sprawling on the floor, not forgetting of course to retrieve the device and the ID cards.

"Get lost!" He barked as he jostled the other Draught, who was poised to attack, with a shoulder bump.

The Wight leapt to his feet with amazing agility and drew a cutlass, eager to do battle, but when the predatory orange eyes locked on him he relented.

"That's better." The werewolf sneered as he checked out the contents of the ID cards in turn.

Like the Wight, he stiffened momentarily as he read Ruby and Jake's information, especially Jake's, but his self-control was much better than the Undead and he then handed them back their papers as if nothing had happened.

"My lord, milady, may I ask what is the reason for your stay here?" The werewolf asked humbly, with a deference the opposite of the one he had just shown to his two recalcitrant subordinates.

Jake squinted his eyes slightly.

"Does it matter?" He countered.

"It does." The captain replied composedly. "If you are here on business, you will be under the care of the Human Faction, who will assist you in your transactions. Once you reach your objective you will be escorted out of the city at once."

Bhammod nodded. This was how his previous missions had gone. Once the deal was done, his clients were escorted with their empty carts back to the entrance of Laudarkvik. He had never spent more than three consecutive nights in this town.

"We're here to stay." Jake explained earnestly.

"In that case, you absolutely must join one of the nine factions in Laudarkvik. To do that, you'll have to visit the corresponding fortress that serves as their headquarters. They're pretty easy to find, since each one has its own block as well. I don't care if your IDs have been forged or not, but no one here cares. As



long as you don't threaten law and order or the interests of Laudarkvik and its 9 factions, you can do whatever you want.

"Nevertheless, based on your information, the two most obvious choices are the Human or Mutant faction. However, if you wish to join my Werebeings faction, I can promise you that you will not be mistreated and will even be paid handsomely. The benefits will not be inferior to those of other factions."

Seeing that the werewolf captain had already begun persuading them to recruit, the Wight also gritted his teeth to list the many perks of joining the Undeads, but the ultimate benefit was apparently "eternal life".

It certainly would have been tempting if it didn't involve "immediate death" first. Jake and the others unhesitatingly crossed that option off their list. Staring at the downcast face of the Wight and his Draugh friend, the group listened politely to the werewolf captain's arguments before temporarily refusing with an apologetic smile.

"My mind is not made up at the moment, but I need to know a little more before I make my decision." Jake tactfully soothed the three guards. "If the opportunity arises, we'll meet again."

The three guards were disappointed that their recruitment had failed, but they maintained their respectful facade until they left. At their signal, the portcullis was lifted and Jake and his group mingled with the crowd in the dark streets of the city.

As soon as they left, the werewolf and the Wight immediately contacted their superiors using a sort of magical walkie-talkie hanging from their belts. Then, as if nothing had happened, they went back to guarding the door, bickering and calling each other names.

A few hours later in Laudarkvik, Jake and the others finally reached an intersection. What they had seen on the way was an eye-opener. If the misery and darkness of the previous village was sickening, then Laudarkvik was practically the artistic embodiment of hell on earth.

Laudarkvik was built like a wedding cake with the poor, serving as a food supply, clustered together in the slums of the outer city. The poorest neighborhoods were literally shrouded in black miasma that the citizens living in them were unable to perceive. Just by listening, Jake had already picked up seven murders, twenty-seven burglaries and other assaults of an even more vile nature.

The main road on which Jake and his companions were walking was the only one properly paved and cleaned, and was wide enough to accommodate three or four stagecoaches side by side. The roadsides were salted to stop evil spirits and many enigmatic runes had been carved on each stone for some mysterious purpose.

It was precisely because of these runes that it took them almost 3 hours to reach the first intersection, which was only 800m from the portcullis. Indeed, the culprit was Jake.

The side effect of his Soul Class had been triggered as soon as his eyes had caught sight of the first engraving and his compulsive obsession had forced him to memorize them all, then try to interpret them and crack all their secrets. One would assume that Elduin and the others would think he was crazy,

but except for Ruby who showed obvious signs of impatience, the others found his behavior quite normal.

On Quanoth, personality and behavioral disorders related to Soul Classes were widely documented, and all but the most ignorant natives had learned not to overreact to sudden behavior changes.

Ultimately, Jake did memorize all the runes and understand the basics with Jeanie's assistance, but without Mana he couldn't do much with the knowledge. Using Aether as an energy source didn't work either. It was like using pure uranium in a gasoline car engine. It wasn't meant to be used that way, even though there were some parallels.

Nonetheless, understanding these runes had broadened his horizons and he had gained some inspiration. He had great ideas for his future training.

"Speak frankly, what is your Soul Class?" Ruby asked curiously. "Highway Inspector?"

Jake ignored the taunt and apathetically retorted,

"What about you? Cosmic Bitch?"

"No. Fallen Angel." She replied calmly.

Jake briefly thought it was a joke, but as he met her cold, clear eyes, he realized it was the bare truth.

"You're not kidding...that Soul Class fits you like a glove." He decisively brought the exchange of digs to a close and then focused on the signpost.

"Where are we going?" Elduin asked tensely clutching the hilt of his scimitars.

Over the course of these few hours, they had felt spied upon by hundreds of hostile gazes and had even caught sight of several of these creatures. Raving vampires, Ghouls, Zombies, Poltergeists, Were-beings unable to take human form and other abominations...

One step off the main road and the city would turn into a veritable cut-throat.

"We're following the plan." Jake replied with determination. "Head for Mutant HQ."

#### [Chapter 684 Checkpoints](#)

Since Laudarkvik is structured like a wedding cake, the remainder of the journey became one long uphill climb. To get from one plateau to the other, pedestrians could either walk up steep staircases with over five hundred steps or take the spacious elevators provided for vehicles and lazy people.

The lifts were not free of charge, as if to make it clear to ordinary commoners that the luxury of the Inner City was not meant for them. Furthermore, whether it was an elevator or a staircase, a new city wall, portcullis and guard squads screened every entrance and exit. Adding the sheer height of each plateau, this city was a natural fortress.

At least on the surface.

Here and there, Jake noticed with his keen vision suspicious marks in the cliff side suggesting that the base of Laudarkvik was initially a single mountain about 2500m high that had been progressively carved by man's hand to form this rocky wedding cake.

After the first checkpoint and a long white staircase, Jake and his group reached the second plateau which formally marked their entry into the Inner City. Here, no more depressed and anemic paupers, but no upper class people either. According to Bhammod, the visitors, intermittent merchants, and Day Races with a nest egg resided mostly on this level.

The buildings and houses were still packed together, but they were made of clean stone and brick, had one or two glass windows, and were properly insulated. The humans, elves, dwarves, and other less common species walking these streets were decently dressed and didn't seem overly burdened.

Jake and Ruby did notice, however, that most of these denizens had physical scars, some of them recent. Bite marks that had barely healed were not uncommon, and many people were missing parts of their fingers or limbs. These people were often much older than the others, but also held better jobs as if that was the price to pay for being able to thrive here in peace.

'Well, at least the miasma's getting thinner.' Jake remarked as he calmly scrutinized the place with his Myrtharian Sight.

Less miasma, meant less negativity and a much lower probability of evil spirits or demons emerging. There were a few ghosts, but they were content to play good-natured pranks or scare passersby. Apart from lifting skirts and flashing lanterns they were harmless. The locals called them Poltergeists.

The second checkpoint proved to be more meticulous and Jake met his first Quanoth Vampire. In fact, he felt it more than he saw it. The nocturnal being was hanging upside down under the archway where the checkpoint was held. Wrapped in his black cloak and sound asleep, the vampire did not grant them a single glance until he was forcibly awakened by one of his colleagues when they too found themselves dumbfounded by the information regarding Jake and Ruby.

Even then, the individual merely nodded without opening his eyes, but as he swished a sleeve under his cloak a flock of small bats flew out of it, speeding towards one of the castles standing near the top of Laudarkvik.

From the third plateau, Jake and his companions formally entered the opulent and aristocratic city center. They were already over 800 meters above ground and enjoyed a breathtaking view of the lower plateaus.

The streets were less crowded and everyone here was luxuriously dressed while the women were adorned with plenty of jewelry. Their hairstyles and makeup were sophisticated and eye-catching, and various fragrances frequently tickled their nostrils.

On this level, the smaller residences were spacious two-story villas with well-tended gardens, while the grander ones were on par with the finest mansions. It was in this plateau that the various Guilds were located and Jake was shocked to learn that the Adventurers' Guild building was virtually identical to the one in Lodunvals.

Surprisingly, even in this affluent neighborhood, Jake and Ruby found many citizen victims sporting fresh scars. Amputated limbs were a rarity and there were no more miasmas, but there was a proportion of bitten people comparable to the Outer City.

'Seems like Vampires have a more picky palate than the other races.' Jake scoffed inwardly as he noted that the vast majority of their victims were handsome young men and women.

These haughty, smug, wealthy men and women didn't even try to hide the evidence of their bites, choosing instead to display their throat or wrist scars proudly as if they were some fancy tattoo.

Jake shook his head when he saw this. These youths had probably been completely brainwashed by their abuser to behave like this. Anyway, it didn't concern him.

The third checkpoint barring access to the fourth plateau was even stricter, but when they explained why they had come, the huge Alghoul supervising the checkpoint let them through. Unless they had special permission or permit, joining or changing factions was the only legal way to proceed to the next plateau.

This Alghoul was a fairly rare Ghoul evolution characterized by high intelligence, exceptional fighting abilities and regeneration. Their fangs, spikes and claws were venomous and a scratch was often enough to cause death. In return, these monsters were cannibals and their hunger was notoriously difficult to keep under control, but they could survive on an ordinary meat diet, unlike the Wendigos.

In terms of appearance, the Alghoul checking their papers was an elderly man with bleached hair, but the fabric of his black tailcoat would occasionally tauten up as if something was trying to get out. Each time this happened, his red eyes would flare up and he would drool over their muscles with a slightly excessive obsession...

When his gaze lingered a little too long over Ruby's white arms, she snorted loudly and released a hint of killing intent. The Alghoul then slowly withdrew his gaze, but never stopped smiling. Each of his teeth was like a long, sharp, cartilaginous fishbone and his mouth had several hundred of them per row.

Once the checkpoint was passed and the creepy Alghoul far behind them, Trash finally caught his breath.

"Damn it, that was the most terrifying thing I've ever experienced. I really thought it was going to try to eat us." The kid exclaimed as he clutched his hand over his pounding heart.

"Erk! If you were on your own, you'd already be roasting on a spit shoved deep up your ass." Bhammod laughed loudly as he gave him a loud slap on the back that nearly made him bite his tongue.

"Yep, I think so." The elf chimed in with a mischievous grin. "He would have told you that something was wrong with your papers and kindly invited you inside the tower to investigate further... In the best case scenario, you would have come out with a finger or two missing."

"That's why no merchant visits Laudarkvik without an escort." Jeanie beamed, her head popping out momentarily from Jake's pocket.

The dwarf darkened as he heeded the little fairy's statement. It brought back memories he would have much rather forgotten.

"That's absolutely true." He admitted glumly a few seconds later. "Many times, one of the youngest and fittest mercenaries will be sacrificed by the merchant, claiming that he must stay behind to handle the procedure. Some of my clients would deliberately choose a young, naive, good-looking adventurer to facilitate these inspections. That's their take on bribery."

Jake could imagine how that played out. When issuing the assignment, the client would offer a paycheck attractive enough to motivate Rank B and A adventurers, but would not place any conditions on recruitment. Those who knew the risks would immediately suspect that something was up, but a newcomer unfamiliar with the secrets of the milieu would see it as nothing more than a handsome reward and an escort mission like any other, or perhaps even easier.

After all, it was uncommon enough to be attacked by bandits or anybody else when the escorting army was of high caliber. With the presence of B and A rank veterans, the beginner might even think that if attacked, he could simply lay low and let the other more experienced mercenaries take the brunt of the risk for him.

How could they imagine for a second that they had been hired especially for their worthlessness and lack of experience? By the time they realized they had been played and what fate awaited them, it was too late.

Once they were back, the client only had to count them as accidental casualties and as long as it didn't exceed a certain quota and didn't happen too often, no one would investigate the disappearance of some unknown adventurer. On Quanoth, thousands were already dying every day before the Celestial City descended, so one more or less didn't really make any difference.

The staircase leading to the fourth plateau was much steeper than the previous ones. The number of steps was the same, but each was almost a meter high. Exhausted and drenched in sweat, Trash finished the rest of the climb by hovering a few inches above the ground with Ruby's assistance.

Jake and the others thought in disbelief that this was her way of redeeming herself, but when the orphan's knees scraped the top of the steps a little too closely, they realized that every one of her kindnesses was a poisoned gift.

By the time they reached the fourth plateau at nearly 5,000 feet, Trash's knees were bleeding and his kneecaps were showing. If Jake hadn't taken over with his telekinesis, the teen would most likely have no legs left.

Jake finally understood what Fallen Angel meant. Being a good person, wanting to do good, but causing evil and harm to those around you instead.

Now, whether Ruby truly wanted to do good in the first place, and not just break his knees, was still to be determined...

### [Chapter 685 We Need To Talk](#)

The fourth plateau was their final destination. One more plateau and they would be on their way to the flattened peak of the mountain on which Laudarkvik was built.

From their position, the group already had a perfect vantage point on the nine factions' palaces ringing another domed building where the City High Council convened. The architectural style of each of these palaces was quite distinct and reflected the identity of the race they represented.

Jake and his companions admired the view for a while despite the thick fog, then set off again. To save time, they had already taken the shortest route by positioning themselves at the right checkpoint from the first plateau. Once the correct staircase was chosen, all they had to do was follow the main path to eventually find the Mutant Headquarters.

The few buildings on either side of the road were rather disparate, and often clashed with each other. Yet they were spacious, clean and reeked of opulence. This district belonged completely to the Mutants, but not all Mutants could afford to live here. Those who were too poor often had to resort to living on the Second Plateau, or even in the Outer City at the foot of the mountain.

The reason why the Second Plateau was not called the First Plateau was simply because the base of Laudarkvik was already elevated a few dozen meters above ground to facilitate its defense. The Outer City could therefore be considered the First Plateau.

In this district reserved for Mutants, there were all sorts of strange humans and his Oracle Scan's report revealed the presence of all sorts of bastard species that he didn't know existed until then. These hybrid species could have unappealing names like gnome-lycans, fairy-specter, or mino-ghost, or they could be much more commonplace but highly discriminated.

Generally speaking, those who walked around with their heads down, hooded, trying to avoid crowds were often Mutants fearful of being recognized.

Ironically, it was rarely the more monstrous and inhuman Mutants who hid, but rather those half-elves, half-orcs, half-goblins, etc. Most often, they were the unwanted offspring of their respective parents, unwanted offspring born of \*\*\*\* or prostitution, or who had been forced to flee their native land to survive.

Observing their surroundings like curious children, Jake and the others continued to stroll along the main road towards a huge building at the far end. From their vantage point, they could clearly see a large five-story Victorian mansion. It was impossible to miss and this was their destination.

Even taking their time, it took them only a few minutes to reach the majestic mansion.

The walls were made of red brick, the tiles of black marble, and statues representing various creatures and heroic personalities embellished every corner of the doors and windows. Circumscribed by a high fence coated in gold paint, a large stylized forged steel plaque read "Mutant Office."

This was apparently not the headquarters they were hoping to find, but a Mutant interviewed on the way in had already confirmed that all general Mutant affairs were handled by this office. If they really wanted to reach the Headquarters, they would have to pass the last checkpoint to reach the corresponding palace on the peak of the mountain.

The portal was already open and Jake and the others entered the compound without any problem. Surprisingly, there were no guards, as if they were not afraid of anything or anyone on their turf.

PLAF!

As soon as they pushed open the heavy wooden door, a plate flashed past their eyes before smashing into the adjacent wall. Bewildered, they identified the culprit of this murderous throw at a glance, or more precisely the victim who had dodged in extremis.

Long silky black hair, outrageously short burgundy evening dress, stiletto heels, pale skin, dizzying curves... The woman who had just dodged the plate was turning her back on them, firmly anchored on her feet to prepare for the next plate launch.

'Why does this figure remind me of someone?' Jake fretted as he compared it to another person he didn't expect to see again anytime soon.

And yet, come to think of it... what place was more suitable than Laudarkvik to run into these bloodsucking troublemakers?

Jake then looked around the rest of the hall and without surprise he found a red-eyed girl of about 9 years old wearing a black gothic dress and a handsome man in a baroque aristocrat suit with curly blond hair. Not far from them, a busty brunette lolita wearing a dress identical to the girl was crossing her arms and stamping her feet impatiently.

'Damn it, I should have known. But why are they here?' Jake cursed inwardly.

How could he not recognize them? The red-eyed girl was Lily, a Blood Human, the elegant blond boy a Vampire Progenitor named Wyatt Griffith and that loathsome lolita... Seren Yelmaer an extremist Vampire Noble, who didn't recognize any legal rights to her 'food'.

By process of elimination... The splendid woman in a short dress turning her back to them could only be Carmin Liche, the little girl's older sister.

"Get the fuck out! We don't want any future traitors in our ranks!" The woman, more furry and beefy than a wild bear, who had thrown the plate immediately flung a second one at Carmin after uttering her threat.

Notwithstanding her pumps, the young woman nonchalantly dodged the projectile with a disdainful snarl.

"You can throw as many plates as you want, I have no intention of leaving and neither do my friends." She declared in a firm, uncompromising tone.

Jake then noticed that the plate-thrower's anger was not only directed at Carmin. From time to time, she would throw equally hostile glares in the direction of Wyatt, Lily and Seren. Except that for some reason, she chose to go after Carmin alone.

Was it jealousy? Jake immediately refuted that assumption. This Mutant didn't seem to fear Wyatt and Seren, but she was clearly cautious of them. What was the reason for this?

Jake already had a small inkling.

As the door closed behind them, the heavy gate creaked loudly and the quarrel was abruptly brought to a halt. All of the mutants present, including the plate thrower and Carmin, turned to face the newcomers and a stunned silence settled over the hall.

When Wyatt, Carmin, Seren and Lily recognized the handsome guy at the head of the group, their eyes widened, but not for exactly the same reason. Wyatt's eyes narrowed immediately afterwards, his fighting spirit erupting forth upon running into one of his only rivals, while Seren nearly fainted upon encountering the devil haunting her nightmares for the second time.

"It's-it's that raving lunatic! Jake!" The lolita yelped in horror as she recognized Jake. Disguised or not, she could recognize that cold and arrogant face between thousand!

Being yelled at and insulted on top of that, her "nightmare" scowled at her and she immediately fell silent, cupping her hands over her mouth to stop herself from saying another crap. Lily, who also had a traumatic memory of Jake immediately hid behind Wyatt's leg.

Conversely, upon hearing his name, Carmin's face lit up.

"Jake! You here too?" The gorgeous young woman, who was dressed as if for a gala began sashaying toward him with a flirtatious swagger as if she were strutting at a fashion show.

The plate thrower had been completely snubbed.

"Like Wyatt and Boris, I finished my Third Ordeal with flying colors so why not?" Jake chuckled. "The most surprising thing is that we are both partaking in our Fourth Ordeal at the same time."

"About that..." Wyatt joined in the conversation.

Ruby furrowed her eyebrow with an annoyed look as she saw this femme fatale approaching Jake, but only an ignorant moron would have assumed it was jealousy. Heaven only knew what was going through her mind as she glared at this woman. Perhaps she perceived her as a dangerous competitor?

"Who are you?" The plate-throwing mutant asked warily as she saw the warm, but uneven welcome given to the newcomer.

For a brief moment, the man's words had become unintelligible as if her brain had suddenly stopped working and it was just terrifying. The other Mutants present had just undergone a similar experience and all had a horror-stricken expression. The Oracle System's censorship was not to be taken lightly.

Jake understood why they were here after receiving Carmin and Wyatt's explanation. To be honest, without his master's hint, he would never have known that he was being treated differently than the other players for his Fourth Ordeal. However, as soon as he found out that it would be held on Quanoth, he realized that other participants who had performed as well as he had in the past could also be sent here.

The real coincidence was that they were participating in their Fourth Ordeal at the same time, but according to Wyatt and Carmin this was no coincidence. After returning from the Third Ordeal, Carmin had not met Jake again, but she had kept in touch with the Myrtharian Nerds through Will and some of the acquaintances they had made during the previous Ordeal, such as Kewanee, Svava and the two sisters.

As for Wyatt, he had kept in touch with Kevin, his cousin. Jake was delighted to learn that Kevin was also present in Laudarkvik. He had apparently joined the Were-beings faction earlier.



Jake was apparently the only one who did not know about their joint Ordeal project. Will feared he would refuse because of his previous conflicts with Wyatt. This wasn't the first time the merchant had played a trick on him, thinking he was doing the right thing, and this time was the last time.

Opening a private communication to Will through the Faction Chat, Jake sent a crisp but unambiguous message.

"Will, we need to talk."

### [Chapter 686 Friends](#)

No answer.

'He must be busy.' Jake frowned reprovingly.

Will could delay the inevitable all he wanted, but he would have to be held accountable for taking liberties behind his back. Jake had warned him in the past, and he'd been extremely clear on the subject.

Will and most of his comrades needed him, or at least an Evolver strong enough to take on the role of Faction Leader, but he didn't need them. He was a loner and an individualist. Aside from his family and those he really cared about, he could emotionally detach himself from almost anything.

Jake was happy to lend his name and authority, but the least they could do was to reciprocate by respecting his opinions and keeping him in the loop when making such crucial decisions.

Now, that's not to say that he was always cold and disliked everyone. In fact, his introverted nature hid a certain degree of hypersensitivity. He guarded his heart by keeping people at bay and barricading himself under a wall of indifference.

His first meeting with Ruby had left a lasting impression on him because she had immediately figured him out. Her infectious cheerfulness and her proactive way of breaking his shell and forcing him to open up had been perceived as destabilizing, not to say invasive, but he couldn't say that he kept a bad memory of that encounter.

These days, after all the dangers and Ordeals he had overcome, eliciting the same emotional response in him would be much harder. But deep down, if he was honest about it, he valued each of his new friends.

He never felt alone.

Lucia reminded him of his past self and seeing her go from being a cocoon to a butterfly was almost cathartic for him. Gerulf, by his good-nature, his straightforwardness and bluntness, had taught him to roll with the punches and created the basis of the warrior he was today. These two people held a special place in his heart.

The two sisters, although they always seemed to behave differently in his presence, even avoiding him, preferring to hang out with the rest of the clique, had always been very friendly and loyal to him. Their teamwork was excellent and their abilities meshed.

Kyle... Boy, Kyle was definitely a loser. If Jake had met him on Earth before the apocalypse, he would have been jealous of him for plenty of reasons, and their first meeting on the wrong foot had for a long time made him despise this Playboy. Although he tolerated his existence, he didn't care much about

what might happen to him. That had only changed after the Third Ordeal when the latter had entrusted himself to him. For this reason, he had readily agreed to save Maeve, and despite his apparent restraint after learning what had happened to him, he longed to find Hecate to rescue him or seek revenge if it came to that.

And lastly, he appreciated Will's shrewdness and drive, as well as his innate propensity to connect with people and build relationships. While Jake was capable of this if the situation called for it, it would still be a chore for him. Beyond that, Will, if not a saint, was a deeply caring person. Despite his ambitions, a natural schemer, and a certain selfishness stemming from his insecurities, Jake did not discount all the hard work he had put into becoming indispensable to his friends and subsequently the Myrtharian Nerds. As such, he was highly reliant on the merchant and held him in high regard.

Will, along with Kyle, also had the characteristic of being in a similar age bracket to him. Their musical, video and literary backgrounds were very similar, making it easier for them to get along and communicate. The upshot of all this was that regardless of the leader facade he had to maintain, Jake really did see Will as a friend and this kind of concerted decision without warning was experienced by him as a form of treason.

This painful feeling of being betrayed was not only a feeling Jake harbored toward the merchant, but toward all those who had been in the know and had not informed him. His cousin Kevin definitely knew, the two sisters too, and how many others?

In a very bad mood, Jake tried to put on a dispassionate and concerned smile as he listened to Wyatt and Carmin's story, but deep inside he was ranting. Carmin and Seren weren't an issue, but Wyatt had almost killed him! Sure, he was influenced by the Corruption at the time, but that was no reason to make friends.

A few minutes later, his patience reached its breaking point and he cleared his throat to end the chatter.

"I've got a pretty good handle on what's going on and why you're on Quanoth." Jake cut in in a fed up tone, "What I'd rather know is why you're all here in the Mutant District? Wyatt being a Vampire, wouldn't it have made more sense to join their faction?"

Carmin and Wyatt showed a wry smile upon receiving this jab.

"That obviously wasn't our intention. Our original plan went awry..." The blonde Vampire sighed tiredly.

"To put it simply, Wyatt and Seren did join the Vampires, but Lily and I were rejected." Carmin revealed with a frustrated and humiliated countenance. "They said they didn't want filthy vermin like us in their ranks."

"Because of your Blood Human condition?" Jake realized his assumption was correct.

"Precisely." The young woman sighed as she tilted her head slightly to the side to dodge a third plate.

The plate in question continued its trajectory, smashing into Trash's completely unprepared forehead.

"Tssk! Why is this crazy woman only throwing plates?" Jake twitched as he helped the kid to his feet. He was starting to get sick and tired of this nuisance.

"If only I knew..." Carmin chuckled happily, enjoying seeing him so annoyed. If he could snap back and teach this Mutant a lesson it would be perfect.

On the other hand, if there was one person who was unhappy, it was another young woman with long silver hair.

Ruby grumbled silently as she realized that she was becoming more and more isolated.

With what she had done to her comrades during the last Ordeal, the likelihood of any of them ever cooperating with her was extremely low. She didn't really regret it from an emotional standpoint, but from a strictly rational standpoint she had acted foolishly.

Then she rolled her eyes.

'It's not like I could have done anything different. Whether it's me or the Digestor speaking is all the same. I've never felt possessed or influenced.'

That was the Trojan Digestors' biggest burden. The host was not just sharing space with a Digestor, in which case it would still be conceivable to resist. No, their consciousnesses were now one single, indivisible mind. That Ruby was aware of this did not help her in any way. It was like asking a lion to give up meat.

PLAF!

This time the fourth plate didn't crash near them. As soon as the female Mutant had picked up another plate and pulled her arm back to make a better pitch, Jake had blown up the plate in her hand with a finger snap.

The plate's sharp fragments flew in all directions, scraping the Mutant's fingers, who let out a startled whimper of pain.

"Are you satisfied now?" Jake growled in a low, threatening voice as he walked toward her.

The hysterical Mutant suddenly felt like she was being spied on by an apex predator and she felt like a bucket of ice had been poured on her.

"I-I am." She stammered still reeling from the shock.

When Jake came in front of her, she quickly stepped aside to let him pass. Once at her level, he turned his head to face her and asked,

"What's your name?"

"My name is V-"

"Nobody cares. Just don't get in my way again." Jake sneered coldly as he released a hint of killing intent. He'd read enough stories to know how to play the bully when the situation called for it.

The mutant woman was so terrified that she lost a gallon of sweat in an instant. Livid, she nodded her head and ran out of the building noiselessly.

Once the Mutant was gone, the whispering of the audience resumed, accompanied by some chuckling.

"This is the first time Vely has been put in her place like this." A Mutant with pointed ears, but sporting a pair of membranous wings on his back, whistled admiringly as he swirled his glass of red wine.

"I think the last time that happened was when she went after Aisling." Another Mutant chuckled oppressively.

"Yeah, that was memorable. I still remember her pleas. It sounded like the screams of a sow at the slaughterhouse." A woman with charcoal-colored skin, and wearing a dress even more suggestive than Carmin, recalled with rapture.

Indifferent to the mixed reactions of the Mutants in the hall, Jake again shook his hand to gather the pieces of all the broken plates in the same place, which earned him a grateful smile from the cleaning lady.

With the matter resolved, he went straight to the counter with Carmin and the others, and a manager immediately took over. The impertinent woman he had just expelled was supposed to be in charge of admissions, but her attitude had been insufferable.

When it came to pretty half-elves, demons or weak vampires, the people in charge usually tolerated her misconduct, but it was different when it came to future talent. Whether it was Carmin or Jake, neither of them looked ordinary.

Ten minutes later, they left the office with their new membership cards in hand. They were now officially members of the Mutants.

### [Chapter 687 Bad News](#)

A couple of minutes after they left the Mutant Office, the massive door opened again and a young woman with crimson shoulder-length hair and irises walked fearlessly down the hall. She had a short black horn arched over the left side of her forehead and with each step her heavy, but tight fitting mythrill armor clanked noisily, heralding with great pomp her entrance.

The chatter and laughter died down instantly, as soon as the mutants present recognized who they were dealing with. It was so quiet that one could only hear the flies buzzing around. A reddish glint flashed fleetingly in her eyes and the buzzing died down as well.

'Aisling, what is she doing here?! Shouldn't she be attending the Council? '

That was what all the mutants in the Office were wondering at that very moment. For this Aisling was the one and only leader of the Mutants. Her authority was unchallenged and her reputation was matched only by her fierceness in battle. Without her, the Mutants would have long been assimilated by the other factions, if not expelled from Laudarkvik.

Deep in thought, the revered warrior greeted the crowd absently-mindedly with an imperceptible nod, then walked directly to the spiral staircase at the end of the hall that led to her office. As she was about to take the stairs, she felt something tugging at her sleeve.

Turning, she saw a group of kids, all of them mutants, looking at her with stars in their eyes. The little girl, who was clinging to her arm on the other hand, had the same crimson hair and eyes as her, and looked worried sick.

"Big sister, is everything okay?" The child murmured nervously.

Unsure how to respond, Aisling noticed the anxious looks in the crowd and sighed wearily.

"I guess there's no point in hiding it." She ruffled the girl's red hair mechanically, then addressing the other mutants she announced sternly,

"The Council has just ended and regrettably I have only bad news to tell you. First of all... Lodunvals has just been wiped out by the Khinchod Protectorate. Just before, there was an incident with two Guilties, but we don't know if the two events are related. What is certain is that it strongly compromised the city's defenses."

Upon receiving this terrible news, all the mutants present without exception were dumbfounded. Just this morning, they were doing business as usual with Lodunvall. To imagine that this thousand-year-old city a few hundred kilometers away from them was now under enemy control was absolutely chilling.

Lodunvals was not like those insignificant villages regularly raided by hordes of Wilderness monsters. In a thousand years, the city had been besieged many times but had never fallen. What had just happened was the official death knell of peace and the onset of a bloody and lawless era from which none of them could escape.

Sensing the doubts and pessimism of the crowd, Aisling apathetically clarified,

"The enemy army numbered 300,000 Wengols and almost as many Wurchings. There were many conscripts, but half were professional soldiers. The Khinchod infantry is superior to Ret'Asian troops, but according to my sources, Lodunvals should have been able to hold out longer, at least a few days. After all, they have Laudar Vikien and an Auras Archdeacon to hold the stronghold."

"So, what happened?" A burly mutant in the audience with a long braided beard asked impatiently. He was one of the few who wasn't intimidated by the young woman.

Aisling stared at him for a long time, then grunting with revulsion she said,

"Laudar Vikien deserted with his private regiment of mage-knights. All the civilians have been left to their own devices. The forsaken guards, a few honorable noble clans and the Auras Cathedral clergy sacrificed themselves to buy a little time to evacuate the citizens. They are still fighting now, but they have already lost half of their men. Archdeacon Fiona is currently fighting one of their Great Warlocks. If a Rank-S Warrior keeping a low profile in Lodunvals hadn't come to her rescue the fight would have been over already.

"Oh my god, this sucks!" A mutant blurted out with an appalled gasp.

"What are we going to do?!" Another panicked.

Aisling let the crowd digest the news for a good minute until the previous bearded mutant once again approached her in all seriousness,

"You said there were several pieces of bad news. What are the others?"

The crowd immediately fell silent, an eerie, suffocating air filling the hall.

Aisling closed her eyes to mull over her answer, then replied gravely,

"The Emperor has ordered Laudarkvik to retake Lodunvals and if possible retaliate against Khinchod. Each faction will be rewarded according to its efforts. This order cannot be ignored this time. A company of imperial griffin knights has been dispatched here to oversee the counterattack. While we await their arrival, we have been tasked with rescuing what remains of the Lodunvals' army to buy them some extra time.

"That's the second bad news. The third piece of bad news is that the Council voted on which faction would be in charge of this first rescue mission. The Humans, Mutants and Astral were voted unanimously by the other members. Most of the Astral are not fit for combat, so the war effort will fall primarily on the Humans and us. In return, generous rewards will be offered to participants. If no Mutants agree to participate, it will be deferred to the Emperor and we will be heavily sanctioned. There is no requirement on the number of troops, but if the mission fails and it is proven that we have not used all the means at our disposal, then we will be sanctioned the same.

"I will leave for the battlefield with the vanguard within the next hour. As for you, you have until tonight to determine the volunteers. All will be clearly stated on the mission board. The Adventurers' Guild has also promised generous rewards open to everyone."

Once the speech was over, the mood in the hall could hardly have been more gloomy, and some of the Mutant children were even about to cry. Reading the fear and reluctance in the eyes of these people she knew every name of, Aisling stifled yet another sigh, then said authoritatively,

"Dismissed."

The Mutants, who a few minutes earlier were still joking about the incident with Jake, Carmin and the Mutant Vely, dispersed in whispers, their faces grim, but several of them calmly re-strapped their armor before heading for the mission board.

They had made their minds up. For Aisling and their faction, they were willing to stake their lives.

Now that Aisling had gotten her things off her chest, she felt much lighter and the girl who closely resembled her followed her into her office, holding her hand tightly.

"Hey, Ais! You missed a grand moment by a few minutes." Her little sister stated impishly. "Vely getting humiliated by a new member after another racist outburst!"

Aisling, who had just slouched back against her chair with her feet propped up on the desk, raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Oh? She probably deserved it. It'll serve her right."

"For sure, she'll remember it, hehe..." The girl giggled.

She then told her the exact course of the argument and Aisling became more and more surprised as the story went on. It reminded her strangely of a description she had just heard not so long ago.

'Are the Guilties here already?'

Because of this one uncertainty, the young woman decided to give up her brief moment of respite to get to the bottom of it.

\*\*\*\*\*

Far away, sitting at a table in an inn, Jake and Ruby were unaware that their cover had already been blown. They had once again grossly underestimated the effectiveness of the Empire's intelligence agency.

As soon as they left the Mutant Office, they returned to the Second Plateau to rent rooms at a not-too-shabby inn. Wyatt and Seren wanted to refuse when they smelled the damp, sweaty, filthy building, but a glare from Carmin forced them to swallow their displeasure.

Carmin unhesitatingly sat on Jake's lap, wrapping her arms around his neck to sniff his carotid artery, but he teleported to the chair across from her and her butt fell back onto the damp chair with a creak.

"Not fun..."

Jake chuckled wryly. He hadn't forgotten how she had tried to suck his blood during the last Ordeal. Especially since judging by Wyatt's jealous expression, her behavior wasn't exactly sincere. If there was another one who seemed upset, it was Ruby, but at no time did he consider the thought that it might be jealousy directed at Carmin.

The one who was looking at him with great interest was Lily, Carmin's little sister. She had traumatic memories of Jake, but her childlike curiosity about him had always been genuine. She found his scent interesting and the aura of vitality and confidence exuding from him at all times was extremely attractive to a young vampire.

Seren hated Jake with all her heart after he captured her and forced her to cooperate with them during the last Ordeal, but she too wouldn't say no to a little glass of his blood. Comparatively, Ruby's icy blood wasn't as appealing to Wyatt, no matter how vibrant it was.

There was something about the smell of her that rang false, like a stale dish that had its suspicious taste and smell drowned out with lots of spices. That didn't mean Ruby smelled bad, but a Vampire Progenitor relied heavily on his instincts. And his instincts told him he'd be better off drinking a goblin's blood than this woman's.

### [Chapter 688 New Alliance](#)

"So... what's the project?" Elduin broke the oppressive silence after a moment.

These Guilties excelled at making people uncomfortable. Ever since everyone had taken a seat, they'd been staring at each other, squinting like they were in a cowboy showdown. Jeanie, Trash, and the two Rank-A adventurers who were enduring the awkward atmosphere barely dared to breathe.

"Good question." Jake cracked a phony smile. "Wyatt, what's your reason for being here? Let me guess. Our plans are pretty similar. The big question is, are they complementary?"

Wyatt swirled his wine glass aloofly, then resting his ageless crimson eyes on Jake, he put all his cards on the table.

"Let's not play dumb." The Vampire smiled patronizingly. "We all want to get on board the Celestial City, but you and I are ambitious and our mission difficulty is adjusted accordingly. If it were just me, I'm confident in my ability to secure a place on the Celestial City, but I have to think about my faction as well. The journey will be long and fraught with obstacles. I want to establish myself in Laudarkvik, become an authoritative figure to take advantage of its population and military strength during the final migration."

Jake nodded in approval. His plan was no different. When the first concrete signs of the apocalypse occurred, there would be widespread panic.

Those with the ambition and hope to survive would form alliances amongst the strong before carving a bloody path to the Shatug Empire where the Divine Academy stood. By then, there would likely be no weaklings left alive.

A few hours earlier, Jake might have considered simply regrouping with his faction members, but after getting a taste of Laudar's fighting prowess, he wasn't so optimistic anymore.

Lodunvals was a remote city, near the Empire's least threatened border. Under normal circumstances, it only had to deal with the occasional horde of monsters slipping out of the Wilderness. Its military forces were therefore understandably inferior.

Ret'Asi had 16 provinces like Icarden's and therefore at least 30 cities of comparable affluence. In Kanui, the capital, the Rank-S Warriors, Mages and Adventurers were counted in hundreds and the Rank-A in thousands. In addition, there were not only ordinary humans, but also exceptional figures with superior gene pool, such as the High Human Abbikesh sitting on Laudarkvik's Council.

The Ret'Asi Empire was an insignificant empire on the scale of Quanoth. Even the emperor could not confidently claim that he would make it through this Armageddon. To reach the Celestial City, one would have to cross the Mirik maze controlled by the Shrons, the Serinese Theocracy ruled by the Schwazens and last but not least the Shatug Empire where the Drurs reigned supreme.

Each of these three nations was an invincible behemoth. The Shrons had unmatched reproductive abilities and a hive mind making their cooperation flawless. The Schwazens... Rumor had it that they were a super-sized angelic species created by Aurae and there were strong clues that they might have a part to play in the coming apocalypse. As for the Drurs... They were the final hurdle and their unique combination of technology and magic was so great that their armies could hold their own against the whole of Quanoth.

On top of that, they would also have to compete with the elites of the other kingdoms and all those monsters inhabiting the Wilderness who would not quit without a fight. In this context, even the invincible Shatug Empire would surely be wrecked.

Without an army, it was a foregone conclusion. This Ordeal was designed so that there would be only a fraction of survivors, no matter what. If Jake and Wyatt could secure a place on the Celestial City by themselves, without a fight, it would go against the precept that an Ordeal should always be difficult.

It made Ulfar's insulting luck even more hateful...



'I really hope the Oracle System fucked him up with an impossible mission to make up for it.' As Jake visualized the King of Beskyr's smirking face, he couldn't help but wish him the worst.

"At first I thought I could take over the city with my Vampire Progenitor powers, but I changed my mind." Wyatt continued as he placed his empty glass back on the table. At that moment, his face became solemn. "I am indeed the only Vampire Progenitor Player in Laudarkvik, but there are already several hundred Players infiltrated here. Every faction in the city, from the Were-beings to the Metamorphs to the Demons, have all admitted several exceptional Players.

"This is Quanoth, this is not a normal Ordeal. At least one Player out of 10 is an Ordeal finalist. The remaining 9 are their subordinates. Jake, now that you've joined the Mutants, all the factions on Laudarkvik are on equal footing."

Jake felt the pressure as he listened to Wyatt's alarming speech. Clearly, the vampire was better informed than he was. He must have been getting support from his clan to know so much.

He was now aware that he was not there by accident. The Oracle had probably anticipated their decisions to some degree before placing them in this remote area.

As for Jeanie, Trash and Elduin, they were speechless. They had a Vampire Progenitor at their tables and they had no idea. And he was also a Guilty. Several times his words had become incomprehensible as if they couldn't wrap their minds around them and that was a typical feature of these otherworldly intruders.

"So I gave up my original plan to seize Laudarkvik." Wyatt admitted frankly as he crossed his arms. "Not completely, but I've scaled back my ambitions. Even dominating the Vampire Faction is a pipe dream. The three Vampire Ancestors leading the three great clans are as old as my grandfather and even feeling their aura from afar I felt insignificant.

"So my plan now is this: First, I must become a pillar of the Vampire Faction, ideally establishing a fourth major clan. If one of the Vampire Ancestors dies, I will take his place. Your position, Jake, is a little more favorable, you only have to watch out for Aisling, but if she was weak she would never have been able to establish the Mutant Faction. The downside is that you'll also have to deal with Aisling's countless enemies, who are looking for the Mutants' demise.

"If you can gain Aisling's trust and become a respected Mutant, I propose an alliance. Your cousin Kevin will do his best to do the same for the Were-beings, but it will be even harder for him than it is for me. In all honesty, I'm not optimistic about his odds. Regardless, if nothing happens to us we will have at least one foot in three different factions. When Ret'Asi sets out on the mass exodus, we'll be able to make our voices heard in Laudarkvik.

"So what do you say?"

Wyatt, held out his hand with a neutral smile, but Jake remained thoughtful for a long while before he shook it. The Vampire's slender hand was a little cold, but compared to Ruby it was night and day.

"To our alliance!" Carmin toasted cheerfully as she raised her glass.

"To our alliance." Jake, Wyatt, Ruby, Seren and Carmin clinked their glasses with an enigmatic grin.

As they celebrated their new alliance, the five Guilties suddenly changed their expressions.

"Hm? Don't you find the inn a little too empty?" Lily, Carmin's little sister, expressed surprise as she sipped her juice.

"Jeanie thinks so too." The Minmin echoed in as she rubbed her bloated belly from eating too much.

"The tables have gradually emptied over the last fifteen minutes." Bhammod disclosed in passing.

He was the only one who had fully devoted himself to his pint of beer since their arrival in the inn, but it turned out he was paying more attention than one might have thought at first.

"I hadn't noticed anything." The teenager muttered sheepishly.

Jake rolled his eyes.

"Don't worry, I didn't expect anything from you, Trash."

The kid didn't detect the sarcasm and immediately felt better. As for the others, their expressions became more and more grim as the minutes passed.

"Now I don't even hear noises outside." Jake stood up and slowly drew his saber.

What he didn't dare mention was that his scan had detected 27 auras comparable to Laudar's, one even more formidable. Nonetheless, they all had an Oracle Device. It wasn't necessary.

Wyatt produced a majestic gold-hilted sword with a ruby-studded pommel. The blade was shimmering, with a pure red sheen.

Seren cocked two stylized rose-patterned revolvers with barrels almost as long as shotguns, while Carmin took her sister's hand and took hold of the scarlet whip wrapped around her waist as a belt.

Recognizing the dire situation, Elduin also drew his scimitars and Bhammod lifted his hefty battleaxe. Trash nervously clutched his dagger, and Jeanie promptly ducked into Jake's mantle. The only person in the group who didn't move an inch was Ruby, who was casually sipping her drink with her legs crossed.

Slightly irked, Jake's lip twitched and he scolded through clenched teeth,

"Ruby... First warning. If you keep that attitude, I will order you to fight them alone and hold them off until we are far from here and I issue a counter order. Am I clear?"

A glint of anger flashed in her lovely eyes, but uncrossing her legs and whipping out a machete, she complied.

"It's very clear."

Clap, clap, clap.

Jake and the others turned toward the applause and saw a one-horned young woman with crimson hair and eyes covered in myhril armor walking steadily toward them. Simultaneously, twenty-six other individuals wearing equally glamorous armor streamed into the inn through the other entrances. Back doors, windows, chimney, cellar, in the blink of an eye all exits were completely blocked off.

They were surrounded.

### [Chapter 689 Third Mission](#)

" Well, well, well, that's quite an eclectic bunch we've got over there." The young woman's crimson eyes sparkled with an unfathomable gleam as she said this. "Two Vampires, four Mutants, a Dawn Elf, a dwarf, a human, and a Blue Minmin, including six Guilties. Listening to your scheme, I couldn't help but applaud your ambition."

Jake and Wyatt exchanged an alarmed look as they realized she had been monitoring their conversation all along. They hadn't noticed anything until the inn emptied. Yet they had erected a sound insulation barrier before they began discussing the terms of their alliances.

"Don't be surprised." The female warrior kindly consoled them as she tapped her single horn with her fingertips. "This unsightly thing has the very practical property of allowing me to sense people's intentions from several hundred meters away. I don't need to hear what people are saying to know what they are talking about."

The Guilties in question were not at all relieved when they heard her explanation. These kinds of mysterious abilities were extremely hard to counter, but their real interest lay not in espionage, but in combat. This native would be able to anticipate their movements as soon as the mere thought of the act arose in their minds.

Besides... Each of these Mutants looked like a worthy opponent. Jake would probably have to give his all to defeat any of them, while in one-on-three he would consider himself lucky if he managed to stay alive for more than a minute without resorting to the Purgatory.

Jake showed no sign of panic, but inwardly he was already preparing to summon the Purgatory Dream. The young woman who was watching them curiously put on a puzzled expression as she perceived what he was planning to do, but she couldn't tell clearly what it was other than that he was planning to activate something to escape.

"I'm not here to arrest you." She stated suddenly. "At least not yet. My name is Aisling Dracul. You should know who I am and my reputation."

All the Players and natives in the group stiffened as they heard that they were facing the absolute ruler of the Mutants. Her reputation preceded her and none of them had any confidence that they would win the battle against her.

"Whether you are Guilties or not," she continued, "it doesn't really matter to me. What matters is whether you are a danger to this city and my faction. I want you to answer my questions and based on your answers, I will decide what to do with you, how about that?"

Jake and the other Players nodded slowly after a brief hesitation. Did they even have a choice?

"Great!" The horned woman grinned ominously. "First question, are you guys really Guilties?"

"We are." Jake, Wyatt, Carmin, Ruby, Seren and Lily confirmed in unison.

"We are not." Elduin, Bhammod, Jeanie and Trash vehemently exculpated themselves.

Aisling remained silent for several interminable seconds, her index finger resting thoughtfully on her lips, then acquiesced.

"You are telling the truth. Second question. Are you the Guilties responsible for the Lodunvals incident?"

Her tone was much less friendly as she questioned them this time. If the answer was unsatisfactory, she would kill them on the spot.

Wyatt and his group immediately denied the accusations, but Jake shot a resentful glare at Ruby. If not for her lunacy, how could this tragedy have happened? However, they had nothing to do with the invasion of the Khinchod army. It was just an unfortunate turn of events.

"The two Guilties mentioned in the incident are indeed me and Ruby." Jake answered truthfully, pointing to his slave. "But I deny any responsibility for the destruction of Lodunvals. To tell you the truth, I was tricked and I was only defending myself. I did destroy part of the city, but I kept all the innocent citizens safe and I didn't touch the walls and the other defensive infrastructures except for the palace of Laudar who gave the order to eliminate us. The truth is that it was the knights-mages, Laudar and his fucking pegasus that caused most of the damage."

Aisling was silent for a few seconds, a little longer than the previous time, then she nodded again.

"You're telling the truth." She assented. "But, then, you are indeed indirectly responsible for Lodunvals' poor defensive response to the Khinchod army. This brings me to my third question. Are any of you in league with the Khinchod Protectorate?"

"We're not. It's a pure coincidence. The kid can testify to that, I've only been in this world since this morning." Jake justified himself in contempt.

"Truth again, but that doesn't mean your comrades have nothing to hide." The Mutant leader retorted sharply.

Meticulous and faithful to her principles, she then questioned each of them, repeating the previous questions and improvising new ones according to what they answered. She easily learned every detail of their daring plans, as well as Ruby's crucial role in the Lodunvals disaster, who made no attempt to deny her responsibility.

"All right. I think I have a pretty clear idea of what happened." Aisling declared in a more relaxed tone. "I will not kill you. I have no authority over the Vampire faction and I don't care if they're being sabotaged from within by a bunch of otherworldly Guilties. Wyatt and Seren, you are free to go about your business. As for Jake, Carmin, Ruby, Lily, and the others, you've joined my Mutant Faction, so you owe me obedience. Since I do not trust you, I expect you to prove me wrong."

Jake didn't know what she expected of him yet, but it made sense to him so he agreed. Wyatt wasn't especially thrilled about being separated from Carmin and Lily, but he had been bracing himself for the possibility since the two sisters had been turned away by the Vampires.

"What do we have to do to prove our sincerity?" Carmin asked with annoyance.

Aisling suddenly broke into a wide smile.

"Do you know what's going on right now in Lodunvals?" She asked another question instead of answering.

"I assume the city is in bad shape and the military is doing its best to ensure the evacuation of civilians." Jake speculated sullenly. Remembering that bastard Laudar, he added sardonically. "And I wouldn't be surprised if Laudar took off when he found out how big this army was. That guy is a total asshole."

Aisling let out a bitter laugh at his remark. His theory was dangerously close to reality.

"Close enough." She conceded coldly. "Laudar and his knights-mages did indeed get away, leaving the civilians and the rest of the army behind. The remaining adventurers, guards, and loyal soldiers are currently sacrificing themselves to buy time for the civilians, but they are only a handful against an elite army of 600,000. If we do nothing they will all be dead by tomorrow morning."

Jake frowned. Why tell them all this. His Player's instincts foresaw the announcement of an unpleasant mission. And he was not disappointed.

"The Emperor has ordered Laudarkvik to assist the remnants of the Lodunvaliese army by all means and if possible repel the Khinchod army and even counter-invade their territory." The Mutant leader informed them with an impassive air. "The emperor has opened his coffers and generous rewards await all those who volunteer. The Council of Laudarkvik has voted... and my faction, along with the Humans and Astrals have been chosen to rescue Lodunvals. Through the Adventurers Guild, it is also possible for other factions to participate, but unlike my faction their participation is not mandatory.

"I and these twenty-six Mutants are the vanguard and we will leave Laudarkvik in less than half an hour. Shall I continue to elaborate, or do you see what I'm getting at?"

"Well... When in doubt, I'd like to hear the full version." Jake grunted as he tucked his saber away. Now that he knew what was expected of him, he didn't need to be wary anymore. The others sheathed their weapons as well.

The Mutants were one of the weaker factions and these 27 Mutants, including Aisling, were probably the best the faction had on hand. Sending in more weak Mutants would only increase the death toll.

This was good timing! Four powerful Guilties had just joined her faction. She didn't care what happened to these suspicious individuals, and by conscripting them she could make the most of their alleged strength. The best part was that because of their infamous status, they were unable to refuse her offer.

Aisling's 'complete' version only confirmed their fears. As soon as she finished her speech, their Oracle Device made it clear that they could not avoid it.

[Side Mission n°3: War between Ret'Asi and Khinchod. Regardless of the final outcome of this conflict, your rating will be affected based on your performance.]

The impromptu notification ruined any hope the four Players entertained of avoiding this war. To their slight surprise, Jake, Carmin, Lily and Ruby had been given the same assignment simultaneously. The terms were vague, not even specifying which side they were to choose, but that only made the field of possibility broader.

They exchanged a meaningful look, then accepted their fate with a sigh.

"I accept the mission." Jake croaked reluctantly.

No sooner had he left Lodunvals than he had to return. Karma had a funny way of keeping him in line.

### [Chapter 690 First Common Sense Lesson](#)

Now that Jake had officially accepted the mission, the others had no reason to hesitate. Ruby was his slave, while Carmin and her sister Lily weren't really in a position to refuse either. Seren seemed delighted, but Wyatt was pulling a long face.

"I'm coming with you." The Vampire declared with a firm tone.

"Do we really have to come?" Elduin raised his hand, his face practically having the word desperation and unwillingness scrawled on it. "We're not even real Mutants!

"Noooo! Why?!" Seren also mortified with a deeply disgruntled expression. If Wyatt was going, she knew she would have to come too.

The blond boy gave her a chilling glare of warning, which made her involuntarily shudder, but she didn't challenge his decision after that. Aisling was amused by the volunteer initiative of this Guilty, but in the end he was part of another faction.

"Even if you want to come, you can't come with us." The Mutant leader dissuaded him in a falsely apologetic tone. "The Vampires have done everything they can to steer clear of this rescue mission, and it would look very bad to the other clans if they were to learn that one of their new Vampires was hanging out with Laudarkvik's elite Mutants of his own free will."

Wyatt's face sank hearing this unpleasant truth. Seized by a surge of pity, one of the Mutants surrounding them hinted aloud,

"If you were to accept the Mission as an Adventurer, the Vampires would have no grounds to hold it against you. The only catch is that you'll be leaving town many hours after us. Tomorrow morning at the earliest."

"As for the elf, the kid, the dwarf and the fairy, your fate was sealed from the moment you joined our faction along with these Guilties." Aisling chortled, "Besides, the Human Faction is also forced to participate so you would have been conscripted anyway willingly or unwillingly. The kid can perhaps be excused, though he would surely have lost a liter or two of blood by the time you got back. The Minmin can also get away with it, but I wouldn't advise her to stay in Laudarkvik without protection hehe. Even I'm tempted to take a bite out of her."

As she spoke her last words, the female warrior licked her lips with a glimmer of desire in her eyes, succinctly revealing her long white canines. Jeanie shivered and immediately yelled out,

"Jeanie stay with Jake!"

Aisling stared at them in turn before nodding approvingly.

"Now that it's decided, get your things ready, we're leaving in ten minutes. You will receive your orders from Norton for the duration of the mission." She informed them as she pointed to one of the Mutants blocking the main door of the inn.

The Mutant in question, a grizzled, scarred man, stepped forward with a strict, stern expression on his face. His inch-long beard was connected to his sideburns, giving the impression that he had grown a mane. His jaw was highly developed and slightly protruded, and his musculature was streamlined and veined to an extreme level.

"Looking forward to working with you." Norton grunted amiably, his face as lifeless and cold as a stone wall.

The matter being settled, Aisling did not even bid them goodbye. She left the inn in a flash with 25 of the 26 Mutants accompanying her, leaving Norton and the new conscripts in his care behind. As they left, the two female Mutants who were trailing behind gave them a sympathetic look before disappearing, giggling into their sleeves.

As soon as Jake was sure that the Mutant leader couldn't hear them, their superior Norton took the lead and radically changed his demeanor. Clenching his fist nonchalantly, a resounding snap of his knuckles shattered the windows of the inn.

"Let me give you a warning." A fanatical glare of stifling hostility shone furiously in his gray eyes. "Aisling has a good heart, that's why we all love her. If any of you intend to disobey, whether by deserting or plotting against her, know that I'm watching you. Unlike our beloved leader, I'm not a good guy... Am I clear?"

"Crystal clear, sir!" Trash shouted as he stood at attention.

'How embarrassing...' Jake took two steps away so as not to be contaminated by his stupidity.

Norton glanced at the teenager in bewilderment, unable to believe that they were really going to send such a dumb kid to the front lines. The mission hadn't even started, and he'd already counted one casualty. Again, it was written all over his face. Jake and the others had already realized that this gruff Mutant was unusually expressive.

"Let me explain the plan..." Their superior began to explain the overall operation before giving them more specific instructions.

With no time to test their abilities, Norton could only rely on their level and stats. The Mutant Faction had access to their identity check reports and he knew everything there was to know about them. Like everyone who read their stats for the first time, he was deeply shocked, but he quickly regained his composure and adapted his strategy according to their abilities.

Ten minutes later, the grizzled Mutant stopped giving instructions, his tongue slightly dry from talking so long without interruption. Jake and the others were not as wary as they had been at first. At least when it came to military strategy, this Norton knew his stuff.

For starters, they wouldn't be split up. With Norton as captain, their group would form the Mutant Vanguard's fourth squad. The other three would be led by Aisling and two other Vice Leaders.

Norton would be at the front, occupying the forefront of their formation and playing the role of the Tank to some extent with Bhammod and Elduin protecting the flanks of the formation and Jake closing the gap. Carmin and Lily would be positioned just behind Norton, with Trash and Jeanie at the heart of the formation. Finally, Ruby would stay at the back with Jake, for obvious reasons...

Bhammod was more of a melee damage dealer, but he could also play the role of a secondary tank if needed. Elduin was an excellent archer and assassin, but his agility also gave him excellent hand-to-hand survivability. His role in the group would be primarily as a scout.

Minmin was a Magic Appraiser and could use a multitude of low-level spells, as well as identify almost anything, even the most obscure spells. Carmin with her Blood Energy Whip and Blood Thaumaturgy was versatile at mid range, but could excel in any position, allowing her to easily reinforce weak spots in the formation when needed. Her sister had similar abilities, but her forte was more about hypnosis and spirit taming.

As for Jake and Ruby... Norton was biased because of his Rune Engraver Soul Class, but his stats were so absurd that he gave up on placing him at the center of the formation. As for Ruby, she was a Fallen Angel and Jake had made it clear that he wouldn't go anywhere without her. These two were the troublemakers of Lodunvals, and placing them in the back seemed more sensible.

What a surprise it was for Jake and the others when they learned that their new captain, Norton, was also one of the Mutant Vice Leaders. No one knew where he came from, but rumour had it that he trained Aisling in the past before she became famous for uniting the Mutants.

Jake tried to scan him, this time focusing the full spiritual power of the bracelet on him, but the only thing the Oracle Scan revealed was his level.

[Spirit Body: lvl 78]

Even stronger than Laudar! As a reminder, the Baron of Lodunvals was only level 71.

Jake was seized by a burning sense of urgency as he read the scan report. He had been on Quanoth for less than half a day and he had already encountered a bunch of natives with minds so powerful that the Oracle Scan's spiritual impulse couldn't even break through their mental barriers.

Norton sneered as he felt several spirit waves probing his body. For a Mutant of his level, it was like a burglar trying to break into his house in broad daylight while he was at home, right behind the door. An elephant strolling through a schoolyard would hardly have been more discreet.

The mind of a Rank-S Mutant was inviolable. It was common knowledge and only these Guilties could insist on it without any fear of being caught red-handed. Because he respected Aisling, he could tolerate this kind of breach of etiquette, but these old fogies on the Council would not be so accommodating...

If they were going to make them their ally, they should at least teach them some manners. His pupils suddenly shimmered a hypnotic silver light and his spiritual aura flared up.

Bzzz! pop!

All of their Oracle Devices, except for Jake's which was much heavier in liquid alloy, went into overdrive and were momentarily disabled. For Ruby, it was the second time in a day, but for the others it was a first.

Only Jake showed a look of incomprehension at their reactions of astonishment, but by consulting the status of his slave he understood why.

'No wonder her Oracle Shield suddenly deactivated against Laudar when she still had some Aether left.'



Better late than never. He had never believed for a second that his Oracle Device was infallible. In fact, it reassured him. It gave him hope that one day he would be able to get rid of it.

"First common sense lesson for you Guilties." Norton let out a demonic smile filled with delight at his own performance. "You don't use your mental sense against another adventurer unless you're able to do so without being detected."