

## Oracle 542

### Chapter 542 – United We Stand

Over the next three days, the four factions were ambushed five more times, each time on a larger scale. In the last attack, the horde consisted of nearly 30,000 Digestors, with a few Rank 4s leading them.

At the same time, each of these assaults resulted in numerous casualties among the three factions despite their change in policy. Although the high-level Evolvers were now actively participating in the fighting, it was not enough to completely ensure the safety of the remaining refugees.

Fortunately, even a herbivore would eventually learn to bite after such violent and repeated assaults. Under the suffocating and life-threatening pressure of the Digestors, these once weak and spineless refugees had shed their former cowardly skins and turned into ferocious Kamikazes. When one had nothing left to lose, one could accomplish anything!

Alas, Bhuzkoc and Shaktilar were not Jake and did not invite these predominantly Slave Contract refugees into their faction. Even if they had, these two aliens were too selfish and conceited to share one of their best Bloodline Skills with their subordinates.

Their Faction Skills were chosen because they brought them personal benefits and were nowhere near as lifechanging as Jake's Myrtharian Body passive. The truth was that these two leaders didn't care about the fate of their subordinates as long as they could reap the benefits of their sacrifice.

The direct consequence was that after seven consecutive assaults there were only a few hundred refugees left under their command, barely more than Jake's faction. Counting their regular members, which included about 200 Evolvers with between 2 and 4 Ordeals under their belt, their main force was still intact.

Melkree fared a little better. Her faction being originally neutral, she was slightly inferior to her two rivals and was anyway known for taking care of her subordinates. Her refugees, slaves or not, were invited to join her faction as soon as they were received.

Her Faction Passive Skill was called Regenerative Photosynthesis and allowed her members to regenerate their stamina and recover quickly from their injuries as long as there was decent light, water and soil nearby. At level 4, this skill accelerated these biological processes by up to 25% of the real skill, enough to make them four to six times more resilient than normal refugees.

In other words, if the environmental conditions were met, their Body Vitality would get a significant boost. For this reason, all members of Melkree's faction, veteran Evolvers and refugees alike, had imitated her foul-smelling "style" and roughly covered their bodies with mud, leaving just enough skin exposed to the sun to activate photosynthesis.

Right now, this faction looked like primitive savages who had lived underground all their lives, but the facts were there: Their casualty figures were 50% lower than those of Bhuzkoc and Shaktilar's factions. The two egocentric aliens were beginning to regret their past choices as they watched their forces gradually dwindle.

Conversely, if there was one big winner among these four factions, it was Jake's. His change of heart had paid off. With the boost from their new Aether and Body stats, these refugees had suffered almost no casualties in the first few assaults and that gave them the time they needed to build up their experience.

Besides, neither Jake nor Grash, nor the felines were the type to watch their subordinates die without lifting a finger. Faced with so many Digestors, how could they sit back and do nothing?

Jake had also taken another decisive step in the last few days, one that proved to have a major benefit not only to these refugees but also to older members like Kyle and Svava.

He had chosen the fourth Faction Skill. Sadly, it wasn't possible to choose another of his Bloodline Skills, but at level 5 there were a bunch of interesting options to choose from.

There were of course plenty of auxiliary Faction Skills increasing the output of their Floating Islands' Aether Cores and structures, reducing the price of items in the Oracle Store or giving them certain privileges in the Oracle Cities etc...

But these kinds of skills were a waste for a combat-oriented Main Faction. These types of assets were best reserved for Subfactions with a non-military role, like Will's Myrtharian Scavengers subfaction.

The second type of Faction Skills were those favored by individualistic leaders like Bhuzkoc and Shaktilar. These were active or passive skills that gave immediate and unquestionable advantages to their members. Generally speaking, they were far inferior to the first Faction Skill and usually cost quite a bit of Aether.

Some of these Passive Faction Skills included Doping, which increased Body stats by 5% per level at a cost of 100,000 Aether points per hour or 5,000 per minute, and Steel Body, which made skin as hard as steel for the same price. For a powerful and rich Evolver, these Faction Skills could be activated 24 hours a day.

Poorer members, on the other hand, could only lament looking at these skills with envy. They were accessible with a click, but without the Aether required for activation these skills would be forever grayed out.

Active Faction Skills were even more breathtaking but usually had an absurd activation cost. Most often, they directly tapped into the Aether stored by the Faction itself, and could only be activated by the leader and authorized senior officers.

Meteor, or Lightning Strike were two examples of formidable Active Faction Skills. They existed in a lesser form that could be used by all members at a cost of 100,000 Aether points per use, and a much more dangerous form that could cost as much Aether as the faction could provide. The power of these Spells was proportional to the amount of Aether invested and well timed, they could eradicate Evolvers deemed invincible.

If Jake and his companions had stuck with a small group, he would have favored one of these Skills, but their perilous circumstances had pushed him to another choice.

The last type of Faction Skills were skills like Faction Vault or Vitality Link that benefited all members and could be used both during an Ordeal and outside of it. These were the ones that provided the most

benefit for their cost and some of them like the Faction Vault could be considered a must-have for every faction worth its salt.

The watchword for these Faction Skills was cooperation. They could be as fearsome as they could be useless if members refused to contribute to the group effort. For example, the Faction Vault required 100,000 Aether points per day to operate, while the Vitality Link cost 800,000 Aether points with the acknowledged risk that no member might be willing to share the injuries sustained.

There were, however, even for egoists like Bhuzkoc, worthwhile skills like Withholding Aether Tax. This was a leader-only skill that could be used once a month to drain up to 10% of each member's Aether. This Aether went directly into the faction's Aether Storage and could then be used to activate other Skills.

These types of skills clearly existed for those tyrants unable to gain the respect and voluntary contribution of their members. Bhuzkoc and Shaktilar had partially solved this problem with Slave Contracts, but their strongest Evolvers were clearly not subject to this regime.

Obviously, Jake had no intention of becoming that kind of scoundrel, so he settled on a completely different Faction Skill called United We Stand. Its description was as follows:

[United We Stand: For each member present within 100 meters, Aether, Body and Soul stats will be boosted by 0.1% For each additional level, the range increases 100 meters and the boost by 0.1%. Aether Cost: 1M Aether points per minute.]

At level 5, United We Stand had a range of 500 meters in diameter and a boost of 0.5% per individual.

Currently, Jake's group had 84 refugees, 16 felines, a baby dragon, plus Will, Kyle, Svava and Jake himself. In total, that was 105 members, for an overall boost of 52.5%.

This may not seem like much against the hordes of Digestors they were facing, but keep in mind that this boost affected all types of stats. The effective stats were always the product of multiplying the Aether Stats by the Body Stats and divided by the local Aether density and this meant that the actual boost was naturally much higher.

After acquiring this Faction Skill, its effects were directly felt on the battlefield. Refugees who thought they had reached a plateau after maxing out their Aether stats experienced a second power-up and it had an even more dramatic impact on their morale and confidence.

With their newfound stats and faith, they molested these Digestors with such zeal that a bystander would have wondered who was really the assailant of the assailed.

In the end, after three days they had suffered almost no casualties. The few deaths were due to overconfidence and were never repeated ever since.

Nevertheless, after these numerous assaults, Jake had not gotten a big head, quite the opposite in fact. Far from being proud of his victories, his sense of foreboding had increased after each battle.

These victories were too easy.

If one slightly weak horde could be considered plausible, seven hordes sacrificed brainlessly one after the other made no sense. After all, they were marching straight into the heart of the enemy base.

And not surprisingly, at dawn on the fourth day, they reached their destination and Jake at last understood where his bad feeling came from.