

Oracle 549

Chapter 549 - Death Mark

Jake could feel the ghostly and churning dark energy exuding from this old man with every breath he took. With his withered skin and gaunt build, the long, loose, unadorned black robe that this Evolver floated in made him look even more emaciated than he really was, as if his body was nothing more than the fragile frame of a kite.

His fingers were thin and bony, his badly trimmed nails were black with grime, while his short, slicked-back hair and long beard were perfectly groomed. His face also had a rosy complexion attesting to his good health.

Likewise, while the robe appeared to have been hastily sewn and dyed with poor quality wool or linen, his silver boots and the long staff in his left hand were clearly of outstanding workmanship as evidenced by the distinctive faint blue halo enshrouding them.

The staff in particular appeared to be made of ordinary wood, but the eerie shimmer of the crystalline orb embedded in its upper end belied that impression.

'A high-rank Evolver!' Jake drew a cold breath as he scanned the individual's Aether levels.

[Highest Aether stat: 35,120 pts, lowest Aether stat: 4987 pts, Average Aether stat: 14,285 pts]

The feedback was almost non-existent because of their difference in Oracle Rank. The only reason he was able to get so much information was because his Oracle Device was much more advanced than his Oracle Rank was supposed to warrant.

However, this Evolver knew how to use his Aether and Spirit Body as a screen to stop the probing of his Oracle Scan. With his superior Oracle Rank he could also prevent him from retrieving information about himself through the Oracle System.

Ultimately, the scan was just a kind of special Soul Skill powered by the Oracle Device's energy. It was expected that its effectiveness would eventually plateau as the power of his enemies grew.

[By sacrificing more Aether, we might be able to get a better result, but that's not recommended.] Xi warned him hastily as she sensed Jake's hesitation. Sensing his doubts, she added, [This Evolver is a Spirit Specialist too. His appearance and equipment suggest that he uses some kind of magic or Aether Spells to fight his enemies. If so, his highest Aether stat might be Intelligence or Extrasensory Perception.]

Jake's face darkened as he heard Xi's explanation. Meeting an enemy with a Strength Aether stat of 35,000 points was bad enough, but 35,000 points of Extrasensory Perception? That totally sucked!

It remained to be seen whether this Evolver was an ally or an enemy...

Jake found out the next moment. As it turned out, his appearance was not innocent. The Digestors had finally reached the scene.

The remaining refugees and beasts, including Jake and his faction, were packed like sardines into a few thousand square feet of space around the mountain. Noticing the incoming Digestors, their feud

suddenly seemed futile. Cornered by this common and universal enemy, they stopped killing each other and prepared for the final confrontation.

Even so, many of the beasts were far too distraught and enraged to break out of their frenzy on their own. Even the imminent threat of the Digestors failed to rouse them. In fact, their instinctive terror only served to heighten their madness and savagery, and the fighting resumed. The other beasts, which were just beginning to calm down, were dragged into a new fight, not against the refugees, but against their own fellow beasts.

The majority of these beasts were not of the same species, nor even from the same Seed World. The only reason they had seemed to collaborate was because they were fleeing in the same direction. Now that they too were cornered, the refugees were no longer their only enemy, and an indescribable mess soon broke out.

It was precisely this anarchy and useless slaughter that triggered the intervention of this old man and a few other high-ranked Evolvers.

Watching these rampaging beasts refuse to relent, the old man sighed in a raspy voice,

"I can't care less if you all die foolish mobs, but I need you alive for the sake of my plans..."

It was pure scorn and condescension. This old man was not even bothering to hide his intentions.

Waving about his staff, his grey eyes turned black and a sinister mental ripple spread instantly over several miles with the instantaneity of an Oracle Scan. Jake subconsciously shuddered as this mental wave passed through him. It was like being doused with a bucket of ice water, only much worse.

Jake shielded his mind as best he could with his Aether and Spirit Body, applying what he had learned from Xion Zolvhur's Soul Stone, but he still got the unpleasant feeling that he had been contaminated by something, as if a seed had been planted inside him that was just waiting to sprout.

[Death Mark.] Xi spat with disgust. [It's a Necromancer.]

'Should I be worried?' Jake asked nervously.

[Not yet. As long as you're alive, you don't have to worry.]

'Wut?' Jake bugged as he took in the meaning of her last sentence. If he was already dead, did he still have a reason to care about anything?

[Look around you.] Xi replied dispassionately.

Following her advice, he found that the rabid beasts had indeed been pacified by this Soul Spell. The creatures and refugees were still terror-stricken, but now they seemed to fear the old man more than the Digestors behind them. When the old man turned off his Soul Spell, this irrational fear disappeared, leaving only utmost clear-mindedness and a reverent dread towards the necromancer.

But what shocked him more were the corpses of the dead refugees and creatures that sprang up like disjointed puppets after the passage of this mental ripple. A creepy glow was now shining behind their pupils or deep in their sockets when their eyeballs were missing.

The fatal wounds that had claimed their lives were still there, but the nature of these corpses had changed. The souls that were destroyed, about to dissipate, or often still intact had been forced back into their bodies, but their consciousness was fading fast.

A minute later, the look of these recently dead refugees and creatures had turned blank, their minds having retained only their primal instincts and some of their fighting skills.

They were now Undeads.

[This is the effect of the Death Mark.] Xi shed some light on this mystery for him, not forgetting to chuckle teasingly when she caught his dumbstruck reaction. [It's a curse that only works on the dead. It is harmless on the living, but is triggered by the body's clinical death. While alive, this Death Mark remains dormant and even gives a slight spiritual boost, but upon the death of their host they claim their body and soul and trigger the mutation of the latter into an Undead.]

'Is it that bad ?' Jake said with some doubts.

[It is.] She confirmed solemnly. [If Minerva had used a Death Mark on you in the third Ordeal, your soul could not have returned to your body after your brain was destroyed. No matter how resilient your Spirit Body was, you would have been forced to forsake your original body and seek a new one. Had you tried to regain control of your now Undead Body, you would have become an Undead yourself and your soul would have been overwritten.]

[You could resist this Death Mark with a strong enough mind, but the Necromancer can channel his mental force and death energy through it to bolster it. Death Energy is the bane of all Souls. Unless you have a huge advantage in Soul Energy and Spirit Body level, your Soul will be defeated. Only, this old man is at least a Sixth-Ordeal Evolver. Winning is naturally not an option.]

Meanwhile, the necromancer was done with his mass subjugation. The most hilarious part of it all was that Will's eyes were bubbling with awe and wonder as he bore witness to the aftermath of this spell.

"Rise my new servants!" The old man croaked apathetically as he waved his staff again.

Jake relaxed as he noticed that none of his subordinates were missing. But by the look on their faces, they had all been infected by a Death Mark as well. Kyle's, Svara's and Grash's faces were ugly, but they knew they were too weak to resist.

Bhuzkoc and the other faction leaders were not doing well either. None of their Evolvers had been able to fully protect themselves from this Death Mark. Only the Black Orc wore an indifferent expression, but with his constant angry frown it was hard to tell what he was actually thinking.

Under the influence of the necromancer's magic, the Undead refugees and beasts reorganized themselves with uncanny coordination and soon formed a structured army against the millions of approaching Digestors.

These Undeads had been placed on the front lines and the refugees' low opinion of the elder was slightly softened by this act of mercy. After all, he was under no obligation to sacrifice his new army for them.

But Jake saw something else. From the old man's unsettling composure, it was as if he knew his army had nothing to fear and wanted to prevent the survivors from committing a regrettable act.

Elsewhere all around the spiral mountain, he noticed that other high-rank Evolvers had also pacified the creatures. Their methods were not as radical as those of the necromancer, but the fighting had stopped. They too did not seem alarmed by the imminent approach of the Digestor horde.

Jake and his companions exchanged confused looks, but Grash, who was also qualified to know what was going on, relieved them by stating,

"We're safe now."

Bemused, the nearby refugees gave him a bewildered look, but they got their answer a few seconds later. Just as they were about to face the unstoppable charge of the millions of high-rank Digestors, the horde suddenly halted.

A gasp of shock went through the camp of Evolvers and refugees. Even the recently appeased beasts refrained from growling.

The next thing they knew, before they had time to comprehend the absurdity of this whole thing, a rumbling sound came from within the rocky prominence behind them and the earth began to shake. Then, as if a door had been carved into the rock, a huge crack opened in the mountain, welcoming them inside.

"The Dungeon Digestor is finally open." The old man croaked ominously.. At the refugees' stunned reaction, he chuckled teasingly as he gestured to the entrance, "What are you waiting for? By all means, refugees first."