

## Oracle 558

### Chapter 558 - Warnings

"What the hell are you doing here? You want my hammer in your face?" Bhuzkoc barked aggressively upon seeing a snobbish Jake striding in their direction, his intentions obvious.

Kyle, Svava, the veiled young woman, and the rest of his men followed him composedly with apparent coldness on their faces.

Staring at Jake, the Nawai leader was increasingly troubled by this oddball. Almost dying at the hands of a Third-Ordeal Player's frontal assault was his greatest shame, and he could barely restrain his body from transforming in his seething rage.

Once in his ogre form, it became nearly impossible to suppress his appetite for the flesh of sentient species and many of his core subordinates were the loyal lieutenants of his native Nawai tribe. Although they were barbaric and primitive it would not help his reputation to give in to his urges in front of them.

" Obviously, I'm here to join the army of Urul Tak." Jake greeted the Black Orc standing off to the side respectfully, the latter responding favorably with a slight nod which frustrated Bhuzkoc to no end, biting his lip to blood.

"You need to work on your temper, dude." Jake gloated snidely before gesturing for his faction to line up near Melkree's group.

Now that they had a legitimate excuse to fight together, they had no reason to keep their distance. All they had to do was wait for an opportunity to take out the Nawai chief and regain control of Maeve's Slave Contract.

The young woman was livid, her eyes blank and listless, but any Evolver with decent Perception could hear her heart racing. Since his first failed rescue attempt, this was the first time the two siblings had stood so close together.

Kyle had matured after the mental torture of the last few days, however, and he resisted the urge to pull her into his arms for comfort. For now, they should continue to act like complete strangers. It wouldn't be enough to put Bhuzkoc and his men's distrust to rest, but alerting him unnecessarily would only make things worse.

Still, the damage was already done, but for a different reason. Bhuzkoc wasn't good at reading or estimating an Aether Signature, but he wasn't a complete neophyte either. He had several specialists to make up for this shortcoming anyway.

Jake and Svava were relatively good at partially masking their Aether fluctuations, but that didn't pass the mental sense test of an experienced Evolver or Oracle Device. Neither had mastered an Aether or Soul Skill to mask their internal energy.

What they were doing to impede prying minds was to erect an Aether screen around their body and jealously guard the entrance to it with their Spirit Body to intercept any outside mind probing attempts. This was the most rudimentary method of Aether camouflage, akin to hiding one's gold in a diamond chest.

Jake actually had a solution according to Xi, but he preferred to reserve it for a crucial situation. That solution was Alloy Shielding/Coating, one of the active skills in his Oracle Device. By enveloping every cell or his skin in a dense layer of alloy liquid, he could effectively stop any type of Aetheric or spiritual attack dead in its tracks.

The problem with this method was that this stealth was accomplished by blocking the input or output of all kinds of energy. Jake's Aether and soul power would undoubtedly become undetectable, but enemies would also realize that something was wrong when they felt their energy disappear.

In other words, this asset would lose its value as soon as others knew of its existence.

Furthermore, because of its property of absorbing all kinds of energy, it was also more difficult for him to use his Aether Spells when his body was coated with liquid alloy. His mental sense would become slimy, struggling to leave his body and harnessing and channeling the world Aether to power his spells would become laborious.

If he removed the alloy coating locally from a small part of his body, he could get a good compromise between stealth and versatility, but he would no longer be completely stealthy. Imperfect stealth? It was worthless.

According to Xi, when his Spirit Body level and Soul Spells became more advanced, this problem would naturally find a solution. In the meantime, he could control this liquid alloy like a piece of cake thanks to the spiritual link with his bracelet and an abundance of Mental Power. It was exhausting, but manageable and he had already used his liquid alloy many times during the previous Ordeal to get out of a tight spot.

In fact, the only one capable of real stealth among them was Kyle. He had a Stealth Skill and had already proven his effectiveness by sneaking off during the battle with the Digestors a few days earlier to peep on Bhuzkoc and Maeve. Jake was the only one who knew about this talent.

Even at level 1, the effects of this Aether Spell were borderline miraculous. Kyle's aura would become indistinguishable from the rest of the world, calibrating precisely to the level of B842's Aether density, and his presence would become inconspicuous, making it difficult to notice him even as he stood in front of them.

The playboy was unable to explain the reason. According to him, his Aether and Spirit Body was still there, but also seemed to be elsewhere. It was a feeling that was difficult to describe.

Yet, in this state he could not use another Aether Skill or his stealth would be broken and it also required a certain amount of dedication. He had to maintain a certain state of mental emptiness and the slightest agitation could also break the technique.

Plus, he wasn't absolutely undetectable. If someone like Jake with high Perception and mental strength focused directly on him, he would still be spotted.

But in this cave, there were also better than Kyle at stealth. Melkree, for example, emanated a gentle aura of vitality, but her Aether signature was completely indistinguishable from the atmosphere. Although her presence was radiant, she didn't need to activate this skill at a crucial moment and was clearly relaxed, having obviously mastered this technique long ago.

This could also be the result of a passive skill. Jake had no doubt that once serious, she could make herself even more elusive than Kyle.

Another notch above that were the peacock lapis lazuli Darkplume, who seemed to be able to modulate both her presence and Aether Signature to her heart's content, and the veiled young woman whose presence even Jake almost forgot while she was actually walking right next to him. If she didn't deign to speak, no one would pay any mind to her, which was all the more baffling coming from a beauty like her.

Jake couldn't see her face, but the few curves revealed by her satiny black mantle and her entrancing laugh suggested unequivocally a femme fatale with a ravaging charm. Statistically, there was inevitably a redneck here who would have tried to strike up a conversation or at least discreetly ogle her, but that hadn't happened.

In his opinion, the fear of reprisals was not enough to overcome male instincts when faced with a gorgeous young woman. Especially here where their nerves were on edge after all those battles.

Urul Tak, the Black Orc, hadn't sought to speak to her either, despite the fact that she was the only second powerhouse in their group and the one most likely to stick a knife through his back at the first moment of weakness. This spoke volumes about her techniques.

As Jake and his motley crew approached, Melkree and her Evolvers creased their brows thoughtfully. They couldn't help but notice that the number of refugees among them was almost the same since they left the Oracle Shelter, unlike their own factions who had lost almost half their cannonfodders.

On top of that, their confidence and spirit shone through on their faces. This was not the typical hopelessness of refugees forced into the fray.

Melkree was doing a little better than Shaktilar and Bhuzkoc with her Regenerative Photosynthesis Passive Faction Skill, but the difference between their respective survival rates was still stark.

Weighing the pros and cons, she eventually sashayed toward him and extended her hand in greeting.

"I'm Melkree. I do hope we can take care of each other." She declared leisurely while glaring at her recalcitrant officers.

Gauging the pretty woman with dubious fashion sense, Jake shook her hand covered with dried mud without changing his expression and while he kept holding it, he squeezed lightly and smiled,

"You can call me Jake. As long as we're on the same side, I have no reason not to fulfill my part of the responsibility. With your connections, your informants must have already told you why we're here. I'd like to avoid any interference when the time comes, do we understand each other?"

Melkree shook his hand off as if nothing had happened and squinting at Bhuzkoc and Shaktilar who were leering grimly at them, she retorted mischievously,

"As you can see, I'm lacking a real friend here. It would be foolish of me to spoil the beginning of such a beautiful friendship. Unfortunately, I'm afraid I don't understand your implication. We are all comrades in fortune here. Who knows how many of us will survive this expedition if we do not cooperate in good faith."

Except that telepathically, her words were quite different,

'If all I have to do to make our alliance happen is not to interfere when the time comes, I'll be the first to be delighted. However, beware, my new ally. I don't want friends who are incompetent or who overestimate their ability. If I think that your chances of success are zero or that you are compromising my own survival and that of my subordinates, I will be forced... to act. Are we clear?'

Jake held back a chuckle at this passive-aggressive speech. Apparently, he and Kyle weren't the only shameless people here. Under the guise of honesty, she had just blatantly disclosed that she wouldn't hesitate to betray them if it meant losing out.

Real friends don't stab each other in the back at the first hurdle. Oh well, he was no different from her anyway... only less honest.

"Then, let me be your friend. He finally answered audibly for the other two faction leaders and Urul Tak. "I and my men will cooperate loyally and without ulterior motives with every faction."

Melkree received a very different mental message, mirroring his own warning back to her in a starkly more chilling tone.

'If a gambler isn't willing to take risks, he may lose everything. There are winners and losers, that's how it is. But there are plenty of losers who think they are winners. Losers becoming winners and conversely are not rare either. Because when someone wins, someone else loses. Be careful not to bet on every horse in the hope of winning the pot. The only fate that awaits such a gambler is ruination.'