

Oracle 559

Chapter 559 - First Death

Melkree's dried mud-covered face scrunched up in an intense effort of concentration. Compared to the reaction Jake expected, she was neither intimidated nor angry. Her emotional state was as smooth and unruffled as the surface of a waveless sea.

Her yellow eyes turned glassy as she spaced out, repeating his last words over and over in her mind without realizing how strange her behavior was. Her subordinates must have been used to her eccentricities, because one of them, a huge Lycan coughed loudly near her ear to snap her out of it.

He looked a bit like his cousin Kevin in his Werebear appearance, but his morphology and thick brown fur were more like a Saint Bernard. The bulges and folds dangling around his lips and his panting tongue covered with lava gave him a funny look, but his attitude was one of extreme seriousness and concern.

His repeated coughs were unsuccessful, so he glanced apologetically at Jake and pulled a well-made lighter from his pocket. A spark flickered and a small, unremarkable flame wavered in the almost non-existent breeze. The Lycan sneezed as he inhaled the butane fumes due to his overdeveloped sense of smell, but he ignored the discomfort and brought the flame to the face of his faction leader.

The effect was profound and instantaneous. As soon as the reflection of the flame appeared in Melkree's pupils, she snapped out of her daze. It was almost impossible to tell with the mud covering her body, but she was getting goose bumps.

"Thanks, Albert." The woman replied, rubbing her nose impassively, before refocusing on Jake.

"If it turns out you're a winner, then I'll be a winner too."

That was her answer. It didn't say if she would become a loser if Jake were to lose, but it was a start.

Jake nodded absently, too shell-shocked to behold a Saint Bernard-like humanoid named Albert. He hadn't visited much of the Mirror Universe, but he marveled every day at the absurd surprises his daily life held.

While Jake and Melkree openly established their alliance, two other faction leaders were eerily staring at them, their true intentions known only to themselves. Shaktilar and Bhuzkoc exchanged a knowing look, then the Nawai leader whispered something to him and the pachyderm nodded slowly.

Bhuzkoc's motives spoke for themselves, but if Shaktilar didn't give a damn about Jake and his clique, Melkree was his most serious rival, miles ahead of that dimwit Bhuzkoc.

In their Oracle Shelter, she and her faction were neutral and that was why they had been tolerating their existence. Melkree was not the only one with informers and spies. Shaktilar and Bhuzkoc had long ago unearthed everything they needed to know about the young woman.

From what they could tell, she had no particular ambition, her character being placid and passive. Although a woman herself, she was indifferent to the infamous treatment Bhuzkoc and Shaktilar meted out to all those female refugees. She did not approve of prostitution, slavery, torture or delinquency, but she did not condemn them either.

Her faction did not engage in these shady businesses, but its members were free to travel to the Red District to consume the "goods" of her two direct competitors. Its members could therefore be considered one of their most important customers and this was another reason why Bhuzkoc and Shaktilar tolerated their existence.

Melkree protected her underlings when the faction was directly threatened, but wouldn't avenge them when one of them was murdered far from the Shelter and the murderer clearly identified. Understandably, Melkree was a lazy and usually benevolent leader, but she also had a screw loose.

Based on her First Faction Skill "Regenerative Photosynthesis", her bloodline was possibly plant-based, but the possibilities were so numerous that it was impossible to conclude with certainty. At least her officers deserved her trust, for they had all held their tongues so far and had done what was necessary to keep the secret of her bloodline from being revealed.

However, there were several rumors circulating in their Shelters, such as her fear of fire, and the boldest one went so far as to insinuate that Melkree was not a real flesh and blood animal like them, but a mere plant. If this was true, it would explain her unassertive, aloof conduct.

Her demeanor and mannerisms were even more uncouth and inappropriate than Bhuzkoc's, along with a flat voice and facial expressions of scant diversity, as if she had recently learned to communicate. But the important point was that she was a quick learner, her personality and behavior evolving day by day like a sponge absorbing all life's experiences.

As such, Shaktilar feared her far more than his other rival, a brainless fool unable to think with anything but his cock.

Objectively speaking, Melkree's faction was indeed weaker than his or Bhuzkoc's, but in terms of individual strength, the noble pachyderm knew that he was not her match in a fair fight. He had learned this sad lesson the hard way, and he still bore a scar as a reminder, one he refused to erase.

If Jake and Melkree were to form an alliance, it didn't look good for him. Because of this, even though he despised Bhuzkoc with all his heart, Shaktilar had no choice but to agree to cooperate with the thug.

"Let's go." The Black Orc suddenly declared in a deep voice, cutting short their conspiracies. Everyone then noticed that the giant whale Crygo and the other two behemoths had already left.

The silent communication between the two rogue snakes ended, as Jake and Melkree also rejoined their own party. Each ate and drank as fast as they could to regain their strength, while the rest finished sharpening or reloading their weapons.

"Follow me." Urul Tak ordered concisely once everyone was ready.

The Black Orc randomly chose one of the tunnels, but Jake noticed that it was in the opposite direction of the Taotie's and rather far from that of the necromancer Nelekai. Once in front of the entrance to the obscure gallery, he turned and said bleakly,

"Remember, our faction is the weakest. You can't count on anyone but yourself, but I'm counting on you not to disappoint me."

As far as motivational speeches go, Jake had seen better, but this did the job. Urul Tak was right, they were the weakest people here. Not because of the Black Orc, but because the three behemoths had recruited almost the entire beast horde.

Counting their four factions and the hundred or so creatures that had joined them, a minority of which Will had painfully convinced, they numbered barely over six hundred.

Indirectly, this suggested that Urul Tak was no match for these behemoths, and he didn't hide from the fact. But Jake couldn't help but think that this orc didn't really seem like the type to be scared of anyone or anything.

The tunnel Urul had chosen wasn't wide enough for a creature like Crygo or the Taotie, but lining up twenty or so humans side by side was no problem. The few beasts that joined them were also those that had been ostracized by the other behemoths and their size was generally mediocre.

The largest creature was a bipedal prehistoric alien about six meters tall that resembled an iguanodon with a long disproportionate beak that almost touched the ground. Its heavy beak weighed down its neck and spine, forcing it to maintain a prostrate posture and occasionally transition to a quadrupedal stance to rest its muscles.

The other smaller beasts were not such blatant evolutionary aberrations, but they were generally not top predators on the food chain of their native worlds.

All three of the creatures worthy of attention had been convinced by Will and he was still spouting sweet nothings to them at this very moment, painfully trying to shore up what little trust they had in him. From the sweat on his forehead, though, it wasn't quite there yet.

One by one they entered the pitch-black tunnel, with Urul Tak leading the group. The beasts, Jake's faction, Melkree, Shaktilar, and Bhuzkoc, followed each other in that exact order.

Jake and Melkree were not happy with their placement, but this was not the time for conflict between them. Pursing their lips, they could only suffer in silence, granting their enemies this petty victory.

Catching their smug, evil smirks, Jake hesitated to attack, but the poised, composed attitude of Urul Tak, who was leading the squad, convinced him to bear with it.

Whether this black orc meant well or not, at least he was setting the right example.

Their small army pressed on through the tunnel for several kilometers on almost level ground, and Jake could tell with his senses that they were no longer in the mountain itself, but a few dozen meters below the ground. If he wanted, he could even use his Earth Control to get back up to the surface.

According to Xi, they would pop up to the east of the spiral mountain, somewhere in the ash forest. Other Evolvers too had realized this, and the tug-of-war between taking their chances and escaping this shithole, or staying here and probably dying, was becoming increasingly intense.

Then, all of a sudden, one of the beasts uttered a resolute squeak, and slammed headfirst into the rocky vault above them. This alien was some sort of mole that had stolen the shiny black armor of a beetle, measuring more than a meter and weighing nearly a hundred kilos. Its long claws were perfect for drilling into the earth, and rock or metal didn't seem to be much of a challenge either.

Unsurprisingly, the creature broke through the rock and clawed the earth with its front paws at a breathtaking speed, slithering safely through the breach. Urul Tak didn't say a word nor did he try to stop it, but Jake reckoned he heard a sneer.

Seconds later, a terrified squeal muffled by the layers of rock and dirt separating them sounded above them, and then a stream of blood spilled from the gap in the ceiling through which the mole had crawled.