

Oracle 566

Chapter 566 - Death Mark

"It was surprisingly easy." Jake muttered, amazed at his own accuracy.

The only reason he had thrown so many fireballs was because these tunnels were so wide and dark, not to mention the multiple turns that made it impossible for him to clearly see who was chasing them.

That Shaktilar and Melkree were on their heels, desperately fleeing the dual threat of Urul Tak and the Digestors goblins was one thing, but he didn't expect his flaming projectiles to be enough to break this evil technique.

[It seems that this Grade 2 Luck Aether was worth the investment] Xi said, albeit with an edge of hesitation in her voice, before adding grimly. [Although I'm afraid this time another factor came into play...]

Jake and the other refugees' expressions changed abruptly as they saw their newly found comrades wince in pain.

"Aaaarrgh, my head!"

The Spirit Bodies that Svara had barely stabilized began to flicker and thrash about as if their own corporeal bodies were rejecting them. The Valkyrie was caught off guard, unable to fathom what she was dealing with. Overwhelmed, she could only use her Soul Stabilization and Reverse Death and Life spells.

The Dark Soul Energy that radiated from her hands seeped into the bodies and minds of the convulsing refugees, modestly alleviating their symptoms, but beads of sweat formed on Savara's forehead, while her face quickly turned deathly pale.

Jake and Kyle carefully focused their vision on one of the refugees whose soul refused to settle down in his own body and they spat out at the same time,

"The Death Mark!"

Earlier, in a hallway filled with corpses, a towering black orc stood in the same stance, his intangible mantle fluttering in slow motion as if the ticking of time had jammed. His bracelets and necklace set with bizarre stone magatamas tinkled eerily, like a requiem hailing the hecatomb that had just taken place down here.

As Urul Tak gazed at the sea of corpses around him, mostly Nawai warriors and goblin Digestors, he was utterly unmoved, as if it were simply a field of bloody flowers.

But when he saw the collection of souls harvested by his terrifying Soul Spell, an evil sneer escaped his lips. Forming a series of mysterious mudras with his hands, he croaked in a hoarse, detached voice,

"Soul Class Spell: Harvest of Heroic Souls"

The thousands of invisible Imp Spirits attached to his cloak by their own spiritual umbilical cord began actively devouring the very souls they had stolen, returning the stolen energy to their master, and then once their feast was over, they stormed towards him, merging one after another with his mantle.

"Unexpectedly, Bhuzkoc and a few of his men still succeeded to escape." Urul Tak raised an astonished eyebrow before chuckling ominously. "But it seems that quite a few rats sniffed out my attack in time. They underestimate me if they think they can slip away from me so easily."

It wasn't bragging. His Aether Strength stat was over 30,000 points, and that wasn't including his Body Stats, nor the perks of his Warlock Bloodline and Soul Class. Orcs were naturally tough and a Sixth-Ordeal Black Orc like him was an exceptional champion among millions.

A sadistic sneer distorted his face and the ghastly spiritual aura that had led to that mass murder emerged again, this time seeping directly into the tunnel where Jake and the others had fled. The spreading speed of this ethereal gas exceeded that of a speeding car and a sadistic smile crept onto Urul Tak's face as he received feedback from his Imp Spirits that Melkree and Shaktilar had been overrun.

Seconds later, his smile stretched even wider if that were possible when his spell reached the rear guard of the Myrtharian Nerds. The matter was in the bag.

At that moment, something happened and he frowned with unease as he felt a tiny portion of his Soul Energy slipping away from his control, as if it had been destroyed or devoured by something or someone. Deploying his mental sense into the tunnel, he scanned the culprit and her Shadow Wolves and Ravens.

"A Valkyrie." He sighed with a faint pang of regret.

The next second, he forgot his melancholy as a hundred huge supersonic fireballs exploded in his face one after another. Forced to defend himself, the spell was instantly broken.

"Who did this?!" The Black Orc roared, preparing to strike back with full power.

At that very moment, his hair stood on end as an unknown threat arose and he forgot his plans for revenge. Looking around him, he saw the corpses of the dead refugees and Evolvers standing up one after the other, their eyes blank and expressionless.

The next second, they pounced on him like hungry hyenas and a full-blown brawl ensued, completely consuming the Black Orc's attention.

The other survivors turned pale as they remembered what this was all about. Their Oracle AIs had certainly briefed them on the subject. Let alone Jake, no Fourth-Ordeal Evolvers should be able to withstand the Death Mark's activation once the conditions for its release were met.

Jake had already come to terms with the death of Nicolet, Diccon, Kelly and her foster brother, but he suddenly had an epiphany as he realized the obvious. 'They're still struggling.'

There was only one possible explanation: They weren't dead yet. The Death Marks had probably been triggered by the forced extraction of their souls, but their bodies were still unharmed. Stripped of their

souls, their bodies had been left in a state of clinical death, their brains, hearts and lungs forgetting to perform their most basic roles, but that did not mean they were formally dead.

At least their cells were still alive. There was still oxygen circulating in their blood, and even a normal person's brain could survive for up to four minutes before necrotizing to the point of no return. Let alone Jake, with their new Aether stats and the Myrtharian Body passive, the bodies of these refugees were robust enough to endure this near death state for at least fifteen minutes.

The only catch was that Jake didn't know how this Death Mark worked, but luckily Xi was there to enlighten him.

[Death Magic, Death Mana, Death Energy, these are abstract conceptual energies that only exist in certain Seed Worlds.] She recited coolly taking her teacher's tone. [It doesn't exist in other worlds, since death as we understand it is nothing more than the shutdown of an organic machine. In itself, turning off your computer or throwing your car into the scrap heap are not dissimilar.

[But wherever this Element exists, you can be sure that the Life Element will exist as well. By its very existence, this Death Energy begets its opposite, obliged to follow its own rules. For this Death Mark to become active, it needs Death Energy, which it can only obtain when the life force of its host is depleted. Death and Life Energy are not exactly polar opposites, but operate according to different precepts.

[In these elemental worlds, any process and phenomenon that favors death will favor the emergence of this Death Energy. This is the case of tumor cells that proliferate with malignancy, which are nonetheless very much alive, or cellular respiration, which generates free radicals that are partly responsible for aging. Conversely, in these worlds, Life Energy will abound when the Constitution and Vitality of its host is high, but it can also be derived from other phenomena or energy supporting life, such as sunlight, water or oxygen present in the air. Although sunlight, water or oxygen can also cause death, they are most of the time beneficial to it and this is why Life Energy thrives during the day, while Death Energy will be enhanced during the night, when everything is cold and desolate. This is also when most living beings are sleeping, their vitality at its lowest.]

"So you mean..." Jake thought he had figured out what she was getting at.

[Exactly. Since they weren't completely dead, these Death Marks are weak. If their souls hadn't returned, they would have fed on their last bit of strength to become fully active, but the return of these souls gave them back their lost vitality. Their hearts started beating again, their lungs started breathing and their brains started working. Naturally, they are alive, but weakened. The Death Mark is still there, as is the Death Energy generated during this short period of time. Now that the Death Mark has been partially activated, it can use this Death Energy to sabotage their vitality with a Death Spell and take over their bodies. Death and Life Energy conflict with each other and enough Life Energy should be enough to curb this Death Mark that has not yet reached its full potential.]

"So, all I have to do is give their body back the Life Energy they need to win this battle and put the Death Mark back to sleep?" Jake calmly concluded. "I got it."

Raising a hand in front of him, palm facing the sky, the Purgatory magically materialized within its hollow. Jake connected his mind to the Bronze Artifact, activating the Purgatory Dream without hesitation. Instantly, the dark tunnel they had been wandering through faded away as he and the other

survivors were transported to a desolate, volcanic land, with lava rivers and geysers flowing around them, while a blazing sun burned their faces.

His Aether Sun Core also loomed behind him, its blinding rays converging on Jake's back. He then buried himself head deep in the volcanic soil and let the radiation and scorching heat stimulate his Bloodline and Healing Skill.

Jake then activated the Faction Skill Vitality Link and transferred their injuries to his body, letting his own Vitality and Constitution consume the Death Energy of those Death Marks.