

The Oracle Paths

Volume 5: The Last Tutorial

Chapter 538 - Who Deserves to Live?

'I-I'm going to kill this motherfucka!' Kyle threw caution to the wind and drew his sword, his face so congested and flushed with hatred that he looked like he was about to keel over.

Jake immediately sensed that the situation was about to turn sour and attempted to talk him down, but as he mulled over his next words he was startled to find the playboy no longer at his side. Where Kyle had been standing a second earlier the plump, ovoid leaves of the bush he was hiding behind were swaying wildly in testimony to the turbulence they had experienced.

As a top tier Third-Ordeal Player, Jake found it hard to believe that someone like Kyle could escape his senses, but it had happened. With a solemn expression, he focused his gaze on his surroundings and it was only by squinting narrowly that he was able to capture the silhouette of his comrade with his eyes.

Kyle was neither invisible nor fast, but Jake had to concentrate hard not to lose sight of him. If he got distracted for even a moment he would have to start from scratch.

'It reminds me of Brice's faint presence. Is this a new Aether Skill?' Jake postulated in his mind with a wistful look before remembering that this was not the time to dither.

Stretching his hand out in front of him, he flexed his fingers slightly like talons and an intense telekinetic pull enveloped the air around the Playboy, causing him to lift off the ground and fly backwards

against his will. Before he could adjust his course, Jake was already holding him firmly with his free hand by the scruff of the neck.

‘Let go of me! I’m begging you if you’re not going to help me at least don’t get in my way!’ Kyle blazed at him with an incensed face. His eyes were bloodshot and he was shaking so hard it was hard to tell if it was anger or because he was holding back tears.

‘Fool!’ Jake slapped the back of his head ruthlessly. ‘Let me guess your plan. You think because Bhuzcoc is fornicating with your sister that he’ll be too distracted to smell you coming. With your Sneak Skill, you think you can snuck up on him and slit his throat seamlessly, right? Good plan, but too naive!’

‘Look around you! Sure, they lost a third of the refugees in the previous battle, but they were small fry! His core members may be livid and wobbly from dealing with the Rank 9 Digestors, but none of them died. They look like they’re about to collapse, but if you weren’t so obsessed with saving your sister you’d have noticed that none of them have let go except their leader.’

Flagging down a large alien with big elephant ears, he interjected, ‘Look at this one. His eyes are closed and he seems to be dozing, but his Aether fluctuations are unnaturally intense while his ears twitch routinely for the slightest sound.’

Kyle cringed as he realized what Jake was getting at, but Jake had no intention of stopping there. Pointing to a huge, fat jackal-like creature the size of an ox, he drove the nail in mercilessly,

‘Look at that one. It looks like a wild beast like the others, but its eyes are cunning and its attitude is different from its fellow creatures. It sniffs the air at regular intervals and has already turned toward us half a dozen times since I arrived. We’ve long since been spotted.’

Kyle's face sank as he accepted the reality. If he had really sneaked in for a blitzkrieg ambush he probably would have been captured before ever reaching Bhuzkoc's tent. Then the consequences for him and his sister would have been unimaginable. Just thinking about it gave him goosebumps.

Just to make sure the Playboy wasn't faking his shameful, guilty attitude, Jake laid it on thick,

'Actually, never mind.' He flicked his hand as if he were swatting a fly in front of him. 'I'm sure Bhuzkoc isn't as dumb as he wants you to believe. Even if he was, at least one of those Evolvers must have a good head on his shoulders. Do you really think that after an assault like that they're not on their toes?'

Indeed, it was impossible unless this entire faction was filled with complete morons. Convinced, Kyle's shoulders drooped in despondency and he looked down shamefully,

'I'm sorry... I know where I'm wrong...'

'It's good that you know!' Jake chided him curtly, only to soften the next sentence. 'I know that what you and your sister are going through is horrible and I can't imagine how I would react if it were Anya in her place. But that's why your friends are here. To keep you from screwing up when you can't help it.'

Patting his shoulders, he said,

'Let's go home.'

Kyle gave one last tortured look toward Bhuzkoc's tent from which his sister's muffled moans were still leaking out before walking away with a gloomy look on his face.

‘It’s just a matter of time...’ He muttered, clenching his fist before disappearing into the forest behind Jake.

Back at their camp, Jake found Will with a graphics tablet and a stylus in hand, taking inventory of their loot. He hadn’t had time to change and was still pale from the sound blast he’d taken at close range, but his enthusiasm was genuine. Managing, inventorying, merchandising, and redistributing the loot after battle was the field where he could truly shine.

‘You’re back.’ Will nodded as he continued to fiddle around on his tablet with extreme dedication.

Not having the slightest intention of stealing the work his comrade was doing very well, Jake left him alone and instead turned his attention to the current state of the camp and their casualty figures.

‘We lost 12 refugees, 9 of them to the Rank 9 Digestor.’ Svava reported blankly as she guided him to the mass grave they had dug.

‘Who gave the order to dig this hole?’ Jake wondered with a confused frown.

‘Nobody. The refugees did it on their own.’ She replied with a sad smile.

Jake was silent for a few seconds, then sighed,

‘That’s stupid. All they had to do was ask and we could have stored their remains in the Faction Vault. If these bodies are buried here in Digestors territory, they’ll be digested before the next sunset for sure. I’ll tell Will to take care of it. In the meantime, tell them to stop digging and get some rest.’

‘Very well...’

Kyle followed Jake with his head down, but neither Will nor Svava made any comment. Although the urge to admonish him was certainly there, they knew from his downcast countenance that their leader had already taken care of that.

At the sight of the nine dead refugees, Kyle was temporarily stunned and his guilt grew even more acute. If he had stayed and fought with them instead of sneaking out, maybe some of them would still be alive right now.

Jfcu hmroarput lozmiiare ovzmpbev ovu hfqn fqmre ovu zudpeuul, frt fiovmpev vu jfl tulnuzfou om luhiptu vaqluid om zulo, vu dmzhut vaqluid om ukhvfreu f duj niuflfrozaul jaov ufhv lpzsasmz, hmrlmiare mz pniadoare ovuq tunurtare mr jvfo ovuaz lnazaol ruutut qmlo.

Kyle was inwardly shocked that a self-centered ruffian like their leader could actually socialize properly, but he refrained from making the remark out loud. In fact, it was a pleasant surprise. He seemed more human this way, reducing the invisible distance between them.

Jake also congratulated the few refugees who had performed well. Ingranus the Bold's guffaws could be heard throughout the camp and he accepted the leader's praise with immense pride. In one battle, his Aether Strength and Agility were already nearing 100 points.

Jake and his friends had forgotten how easy it was to get their Aether Stats up in the beginning, but it was once they reached 100 that the real challenge would begin. After that, it was just a long and tedious grinding and without adequate Bloodlines, Encodings or Aether Skills it could even become an insurmountable challenge.

Nicolet, Diccon and Takoyaki were also doing well as evidenced by their elated grins and blood covered clothes. Well, with its octopus body it was hard to judge for Takoyaki, but it clearly looked happy.

Jake and Kyle eventually made it to the edge of the crater left by the Rank 9 Digester's landing and he was disturbed when he spotted Kelly and the orphaned boy sobbing while hugging the balding man's corpse. Apparently he had not joined the pit with the other bodies.

Saying nothing, he observed the rigid astonished, but unexpectedly valiant and determined face of this man before experiencing a strange feeling. As if the young woman knew what was bothering him, she said,

‘Uncle Barty never held a weapon in his life, never raised his voice at anyone. He was a loving husband and a good man before this whole thing happened, but he was such a nice guy that he got picked on by everybody. When his wife died at the hands of the Digestors, he could have given up and forgotten his principles, but he took it upon himself to take care of me and Khal who were orphaned when he didn't have to. While he was terrified to the point of shuddering, he still stepped in front of that Digester to save me... If we follow your logic, Uncle Barty didn't deserve to be saved, but in that case I would be dead too. Can you be so sure that no one you know is like Uncle Barty. Maybe they will die too because someone like you refused to save them...‘

Jake thought of his Uncle Kalen and his face fell.. His uncle was definitely not a fighter.