

Oracle 550

Chapter 550 - Dungeon Digestor

Just after he said these words, his army of Undeads facing the millions of Digestors swung around in perfect synchrony. An ominous blue flame glinted fleetingly inside their eye sockets and with the same unnerving coordination they pointed their weapons at the refugees and Evolvers still alive.

The unarmed Undead beasts camped their position, their posture prostrate and their muscles tensed in anticipation of the impending assault. Their growls were unmistakably hostile.

Jake and his companions had a brief, silent conversation using their telepathy, which resulted in a dramatic decision. Through their faction communication link, he then gave the order they had discussed.

"Let's enter the mountain."

The refugees from his faction hesitated briefly, but their common sense overcame their fear. The horned, scaly alien's faction using the Gigantism skill also opted for the same choice. Not forgetting to cast a wary glance at the necromancer and his army of Undead, they retreated in good order.

Jake and the other Evolvers had considered for a second the possibility of forcing their way out through the Digestor Horde, but it only took one shot at these Digestors to give up.

These Digestors were too strong.

There were ghastly Aether signatures out there amongst this horde of monsters, several hundred of which did not pale at all next to that of the old man and those other high-ranked Evolvers.

The hard truth was that this all-powerful necromancer had no choice either. Maybe he could fly away if he was willing to lose a few feathers, but he definitely hadn't come all this way to return empty-handed.

Still, the most jarring part of all these twists and turns was by far this inexplicable truce. A few days earlier, Jake and his faction had encountered their first Rank 9 Digestor with non-violent intentions. After completing its mysterious mission, it had left without showing any sign of hostility.

And now those millions of Digestors were doing the same. A few seconds earlier they were still chasing, harassing and slaughtering all those beasts like a pack of hungry hyenas, but now they calmly camped their positions, as if they were unable to cross an invisible barrier.

The ferocity and irrational hatred of these monsters was still very much in them, as evidenced by the furious silver glow burning deep inside their eyeballs. These highly evolved Digestors had little to do with the ranks 1, 2 and 3 they had fought in recent days and their unexpected self-control made them even more chilling.

The bulk of this horde was Rank 5, with at least one Rank 6 Digestor for every ten monsters. Rank 7s were not so rare either, and Jake reckoned at least 800 Rank 8 Digestors just on their side of the mountain.

The ultimate threat was obviously those Ranks 9 and 10 Digestors hidden or not in the midst of all their fellows, but Jake was comparatively more afraid of those thousands of Rank 5 and 6 Digestors in the forefront who were greedily eyeing them up.

Many of them had chosen the humanoid evolutionary route. It was a trend he had already noticed while fighting his first Rank 3 Digestor months earlier. Compared to these clumsy, heavy-handed opponents, these humanoid monsters had perfect control of the silver material filling their bodies.

The silver chitin armor covering every inch of their flesh was intricately designed and arranged, looking more like the masterpieces of an expert blacksmith than armor hastily fashioned by brainless monsters. Their upper limbs no longer ended in silver scythes or primitive shields, but in actual hands. These still required some polishing to reach the sleekness of human hands, but they were sufficient to handle the terrible weapons they clutched firmly.

These weapons were just like the chitin they wore as armor and proved that these Digestors could now sacrifice their biomass to customize their own equipment. The quality and craftsmanship of the latter was like a declaration to the world of their superior sensitivity and intelligence, and it was far more terrifying than fighting stupid creatures acting only on instinct.

Jake couldn't see the faces of these monsters under their smooth visored helmets, but something in the back of his mind kept screaming at him that he wouldn't like what he found underneath...

In addition to these humanoid Digestors, there were also many variants that had chosen other evolutionary paths. There were thousands of Elemental-Spitters, whose morphology had greatly diversified. This ranged from avian, insectoid, bipedal, quadripedal, centipedal... to more unusual chimeric mutations.

Depending on their talent, inspiration and what they had ingested, these Digestors had evolved in all sorts of directions, some of them very successful, while others were destined to become evolutionary dead ends.

Such was the case with this Rank 6 Digestor crawling in front of him, which looked like a malformed baby squid without tentacles. Stinking of rotting guts, this mass of gray flesh could only squeak horribly. Even his congeners refused to go near it and looked at it with despise and disgust.

Yet it would never occur to Jake to underestimate this abomination. He remembered his encounter with that Rank 5 Slug. It too seemed to be a failure with its obvious slowness and lack of protective chitin. Yet, this bug was frigging smart and capable of commanding lower-ranked Digestors, every cell of its being a reservoir of toxins making anyone who deigned to get too close pay dearly.

On the other hand, its evolved form was not an evolutionary failure at all. This Silver Butterfly was still the fastest Digestor he had even laid eyes on and its ability to control Digestor Hordes was a nightmarish skill.

Staring at this thing, Jake was tempted to scan the horde for these "butterflies", but he finally resisted his urge. If they could intercept his scan like the necromancer, then he would just be painting a red target on himself.

"You're smart kid, but don't be too smart." The old man's husky voice croaked chillingly in his head. "If you play along, I can promise you and your men will survive this 'ordeal'."

Jake's face twitched imperceptibly, but he wasn't the type to be intimidated either. He couldn't help but retort wily,

'Do you say that telepathically to all the faction leaders?'

The old man's mouth stretched into a wide creepy smile, revealing a set of perfectly aligned white teeth. As that unsightly pale blue gleam in his eyes gradually brightened in warning, he whispered,

"Perhaps."

Jake heard it, Grash heard it, Bhuzkoc and the other faction leaders heard it. They all reacted the same way. It was as if they had engaged in the same telepathic conversation simultaneously and asked the same questions. Perhaps their exchange was different, but the necromancer's final answer left them with the same uneasy feeling.

This old fox was definitely not a good person.

With their choice made, the dozens of factions entered the spiral mountain one by one, through the recently opened breach. It took several minutes before it was Jake's and his comrades' turn. Before him, the more influential and better situated factions had already begun their exploration.

At least the old man didn't abandon them, unlike the other high-ranking Evolvers, who immediately rejoined their groups after settling the commotion. The latter was hovering spookily above them, nonchalantly waving his mage staff to control his Undead Army and dissuade refugees and Digestors from doing something stupid.

When the last Undead beast faded into the rocky prominence, the rift instantly closed as if it had never existed. The next moment, the seemingly perfectly coordinated Digestor horde began to cackle anarchically again, some monsters even resuming their brawling.

One of the Rank 10 Digestors, a behemoth weighing several thousand tons and resembling a living fortress with its multiple legs, carapace and multiple silver eyes shooting purple laser beams wherever they landed squashed to pulp a few hundred of these disruptive Digestors with a single stamp.

Then another Digestor resembling a large wasp and hidden in the recesses of its chitin emitted a high-pitched hiss and the Digestors shuddered in fright, the more reckless ones squeaking weakly to show their protest. Their skulls exploded as a reward for their impertinence.

After that, the Digestors dispersed, returning to their original haunts to go about their business. The other half stayed behind, waiting for cracks like the ones that had opened the mountain to split the earth beneath their feet and swallow them up.

When the fissures closed a few minutes later, there was no trace of the recent presence of this horde of millions of powerful Digestors. Only footprints and evidence of fighting between the refugees and the rampaging beasts testified that a bloody battle had taken place here.

When Jake and his companions crossed the gap, they were surprised that the darkness on the other side did not suffocate them. They had prepared flashlights and torches and had even prepared themselves mentally to depend on their Aether Vision to deal with future threats, but their precautions proved useless.

And they were not unhappy about it.

The inside of the rocky protrusion was a spacious cavern, but Jake was surprised to discover that the rock beneath their feet was paved, while the walls and ceiling were the result of a perfect stack of rectangular stones. The only strange thing was that these were exactly the same color as the rock forming the mountain and these stones perfectly followed the curves of the cave walls.

It was not a natural construction, but it was on the other hand completely absurd to cut the walls of the cave to obtain such a rendering. In addition to these stone walls, there were wall torches at each junction.

The material of which they were made was eerily reminiscent of the silvery chitin covering the Digestors' flesh, and a white crystal at the top gave off a soft light that made for decent visibility.

In addition to this main cavern, there were hundreds of galleries and corridors inviting them to explore the place. Even more mysterious, in front of each of these corridors was a strange White Cube reminiscent of the Orange Cubes that abound in the Oracle Cities.

The impression it left on all of them was that they were in some kind of catacomb. If they still doubted it before, now they were sure.

No doubts.. They were standing in the belly of a Dungeon Digestor.