

Oracle 568

Chapter 568 - Underground Kingdom

The temperature here was a little higher, about two or three degrees. The tunnels and halls paved with rocks and perfectly rectangular slabs were gone, replaced by a cavern stretching as far as the eye could see. An ashy forest similar to the one on the surface ran as far as the eye could see along with a few hills and mountains.

As Jake levitated high into the air, he saw a black opaque lake the size of a small town with dark plumes of smoke billowing from the surface that did not bode well. There were also several wide trails and dirt roads whose packed earth and deep furrows made it clear that they were frequently trodden upon by bipedal creatures and carriages of all kinds.

Looking further, and directing all of his Perception Aether into his Myrtharian Eyes, Jake even vaguely discerned unnatural geometric shapes reminiscent of the outline of a city or village. Examining this new territory carefully, Jake counted six or seven suspicious architectural structures of this type. With the distance, they could not yet clearly estimate their size.

If Jake hadn't clearly memorized every twist and turn that led them here, he might almost have thought they had left B842. Maybe they had.

"This reminds me of my last Ordeal World." Crunch's voice squeaked anxiously below him.

Jake looked down at his cat.

"...Crunch..."

"Yes, master?" The black cat replied obsequiously.

"Why are you still clinging to my leg?" Jake asked slowly, the corner of his lips twitching ominously.

At that very moment, Jake was levitating more than fifty meters off the ground with a full-grown feline weighing at least a ton hanging firmly on his right leg as if it were the most normal thing in the world. To complete the comical picture, the Orange Turkey was proudly perched on his cat's huge, stupid head, his talons tightly gripping the fold of skin and fur on his forehead. His skin was stretched taut towards the back of his skull, also tugging at his eyelids, making his cat's already unsmart gaze look somewhat surprised.

"I don't know, it just feels safer here." Crunch answered honestly, licking his master's leg several times with his pink tongue to show his affection.

The result was a bit off from his first intention, drenching the bottom of his master's pants with slime, which went so far as to seep into his boots and soak his socks.

"Safer? My ass!" Jake shook his right leg off the clingy cat, sending him spinning straight to the ground.

Staring up at him as he plummeted with a saddened expression, Crunch sucked in the air around him in one breath, swelling like a blowfish. With his steel-hard black fur he now resembled a giant sea urchin with the diameter of a hot air balloon.

His fall slowed down drastically, even bouncing two or three times like a real balloon when he struck a tree branch. If he hadn't exhaled the excess air and returned to his normal form, he might have continued to bounce for a long time.

"I don't get your skill choices." Jake raised a bewildered eyebrow, his annoyance gone.

He'd known his cat Crunch was insane and depraved for a long time, but even his evolutionary curve was exceedingly marginal compared to other felines. It wasn't that his evolution was a failure, quite the contrary. When this cat was willing, this hairball could be a real killing machine. However, it was clear that he was going against the norm compared to other felines like Mufasa and Shere Khan who were proud of their pedigree.

After seeing what he needed to see, Jake floated leisurely to the ground, his hands clasped behind his back to rejoin the two animals. Crunch had already shaken his fur off the leaves and tree twigs that covered him, while the turkey was calmly pecking at a fat, silvery earthworm he'd unearthed from who knows where.

"There are even bugs here?" Jake wondered with a sense of foreboding. This place had more surprises than he hoped for. Too many of them in fact.

All signs pointed to this place having its own ecosystem. Looking up at the cavern ceiling, Jake peered at it intently as if he hoped to see through it, trying to estimate how far underground they were now.

'Hopefully, we shouldn't have gone too far down or it might become a hellish place for the other Myrtharian Nerds.'

Having these thoughts, Jake couldn't conceal the worry that was gnawing at him. He didn't know exactly how this Dungeon Digestor differed from a normal Dungeon, but usually the further down the floors you went, the more difficult it became. The logic of a video game didn't necessarily apply to this place, but his legendary pessimism preferred to assume the worst rather than end up hopeless and depressed when the time came.

The other refugees were not like him. With the current Aether density, their Aether stats at 100 points or so, and the Myrtharian Body passive, their effective attributes were roughly worth those of four to ten adult humans.

The most sedentary or malnourished members had a Body Strength and Constitution around 30 or 40, even under the 240% bonus from the Myrtharian Body passive. Without this boost, the Body Strength of a kid like Khal was no more than 4 points.

Most of them were indeed malnourished when they left the Oracle Shelter. Several days of intense fighting and walking hadn't helped, although they had filled up a bit by gorging on Digestor flesh and blood at every opportunity.

Jake may have changed their destiny by giving them a chance to survive, but now that they were separated their future was once again uncertain. Even the "United We Stand" Faction Skill had lost most of its effectiveness now that they were scattered far apart.

As he wondered where they had all landed, the Orange Turkey gobbled fiercely towards a certain bush, while Crunch's fur bristled like a hedgehog again. If even a bird and a cat could detect this presence, Jake could too.

BANG! BANG!

One air bullet, then a second detonated after blasting through the bush and several tree trunks lined up behind. The powerful blast carved a trench in the ground starting from Jake, splitting the forest in two to reveal the thing spying on them in the bushes. At his feet also lay a silver arrow broken in half, its tip dripping with a slimy, blackish liquid.

Poison! If Jake hadn't immediately counterattacked, this poisoned arrow could have caused major damage to Crunch or the Orange Turkey. Although he trusted his Constitution, not knowing what poison he was dealing with, he thought it prudent not to test his limits unnecessarily.

"Shrrri!"

A dark mass burst out of the bushes before decisively running away.

Jake recognized a gray goblin archer similar to those during the hall attack, but this one was more robust and better fed. Its skin and clothing blended in with the ashen forest scenery, while its equipment, though rudimentary, was unmistakably designed for killing.

Seeing the hideous creature try to flee after attempting to assassinate them, Jake sneered and fired a third round of wind. The goblin's head exploded like an overripe fruit falling from the tenth floor, and its lifeless body lumbered forward a few more feet before collapsing, its momentum exhausted.

Jake saw no Aether hanging over the body as the Mirror Universe had accustomed him to, but his Oracle Status told him that his Aether stats and Spirit Body level had indeed increased. This was obviously not enough to gain a level, but if he wanted his Oracle Device could be accurate to the thousandth decimal digit.

Crunch and the turkey pranced happily over to the corpse to taunt and humiliate the poor goblin with their urine even in the afterlife while Jake stood still, his eyes deep in thought.

'This goblin was weak. One on one it should be no problem for the other members. One on two should be fine too. More than three, and the odds of dying become substantial.'

[If they encounter lone goblins like this one, this situation is actually preferable to the one on the second floor, where we had to fear the shenanigans of Urul Tak and Bhuzkoc.] Xi commented coldly. [At least here the chances of survival are fair.]

'You're right, as always, but you're forgetting one detail.' Jake closed his eyes thoughtfully before opening them again with a not at all optimistic expression.

[And what is it?] She asked curiously.

Jake pointed to the broken arrow at his feet.

'They use poison and they know how to exploit their environment to ambush us. I doubt these goblins will give them a chance to fight an honest fight.'

[You worry too much. Not everyone is as comfy as you are here. These refugees will never have the guts to soar up into the sky making a racket announcing their arrival. According to this logic, it is these goblins who are most likely to be ambushed by the other refugees and Evolvers.]

It was a reasonable argument, though it wasn't enough to dispel the bad vibe that was bothering him. Indeed, Xi added immediately afterwards,

[However, this goblin was just a wandering hunter. He was just looking for food. If I'm not mistaken, we're on the second floor of this dungeon. There must be more than just a few wretched goblins in those infrastructures you saw earlier. If a normal refugee comes across a regiment like the one that attacked us earlier, they are undoubtedly dead. In that battalion, there were not only goblin Digestors, but also an orc Digestor and one with human features using magic. If they run into any more of these aliens, they're screwed too.

[Lastly, there is another far worse threat hanging over them: The other Evolvers.. In my opinion, running into Bhuzkoc, Shaktilar, Urul Tak, or anyone from the other factions is a far more deadly danger than any of these dumb monsters.]