

Oracle 577

Chapter 577 - Easy Booty

[Their souls were stripped from them before they died.] Xi observed coldly.

"Not just their souls." Jake's face darkened as he said this.

They were not in an Ordeal. Losing their Oracle Device would have unpredictable long-term consequences.

Examining the bodies, Jake discovered that there was no trace of liquid alloy left in them. Not even in the brain. However, the Death Mark was no longer present and they had not been resurrected. Urul had obviously learned from his previous experience.

'How is that possible?!' Jake had trouble hiding his shock.

He quickly formulated several plausible hypotheses, but Xi spared him the hassle by giving him the answer directly.

[When their Soul and Spirit Body was extracted, their bodies were still alive but unresponsive. This is the perfect time to take away their bracelets completely, including the liquid alloy parasitizing their brains].

Jake twitched imperceptibly as he noted his Oracle AI's choice of words, but they were on the same page. Deep down, he had hoped that even outside of an Ordeal, the Oracle would have put some measure in place to preserve what was left of their bracelet, but it was useless if they were dead.

[In the end, the liquid alloy still went into the hands of another Evolver. The Digestors got nothing, and that's all that matters.] Xi spoke.

'So what if it's a Digestor trying to steal these bracelets?' Jake asked, his curiosity suddenly aroused.

The weary sigh of his Oracle AI echoed in his head.

[Usually... nothing. They take the liquid alloy and that's it. As you know from your Second Ordeal, this alloy is made in the oldest Systems such as A0 from the crystallized Spirit Body of old Evolvers deceased or not. It is a precious resource, even for these monsters. The only thing we can do before our capture is to erase all data and connection to the Oracle System.]

'No self-destruct measure?' Jake blurted out upon receiving this delightful surprise.

He had feared his head would explode in the event of disobedience or betrayal, but perhaps he had overestimated the Oracle's capabilities. Xi's next words brought him back to earth.

[Don't forget that the liquid alloy has infiltrated every cell, including your brain. Deleting the data does not only include the data in the bracelet, but also the data in your neurons. As the main ingredient is a purified mixture of Soul Stones, it is possible to ignite their energy to cause an explosion, but the Oracle would never do that.]

"Why not?"

[Because the liquid alloy is too valuable.] Xi explained matter-of-factly. [As for the technology itself, high-rank Digestors can use wristbands as advanced as ours, if not even more so. Given the current situation in the Mirror Universe, the higher-ups prefer to let the enemy take the liquid alloy. It makes them stronger, but at least it can be taken back from them if they win. Don't ask me why, but the Digestors don't self-destruct their liquid alloy either when compromised.]

Jake noticed that his Oracle AI was more talkative than usual. Those stolen bracelets had probably awakened some vivid memories she would have rather forgotten. She had also unintentionally dropped a bombshell: Some Digestors also used bracelets like their own.

As Jake continued to stalk Urul, he came across other victims and each time, their Souls and Oracle Devices had been stolen. If Urul was adept at these practices, perhaps his Oracle Device was even more advanced than his own. This would be the first time he faced such an opponent.

Factoring in the energy boost provided by each Oracle Rank promotion, Jake's face broke down in horror and he retreated several miles before remembering that the trees in this forest appeared to be interfering with his mental sense and his Oracle scans just as much as the cave walls.

If they were in a normal forest, Urul Tak would surely have detected him long ago.

'I need to be more careful. Urul isn't the only High-Rank Evolver to roam this Dungeon.' Jake repeated to himself as he began to tread more carefully this time.

From that moment on, Jake made sure to always have a tree trunk blocking his view at mid-distance, so that no scan could reach him by chance. In practice, this was simple enough considering the density of trees in this forest, but it was one thing to rely on luck and knowing it.

Thinking back on his luck, Jake figured that without being aware of it the Aether of Luck obtained thanks to Tim had already saved him from getting himself in some sticky situation several times. Perhaps, he had just been lucky until now and this ashy forest was not as simple as he thought.

Continuing to track the Black Orc, Jake had long since lost sight of him, but now he was using his Luck and tracking skills to stay on the right path. When he spotted more dead Evolvers, he knew he hadn't made a mistake.

This time he recognized the corpse. It was hard not to recognize it... Octopus tentacles cut into slices, a pronounced smell of iodine, and a blade broken in two of which he was the creator.

"Takoyaki." Jake concluded while closing the eyes of the octopus alien he had never heard speak.

Woosh!

A ball of black fur and a trail of orange feathers flashed before his eyes and the tentacle lying at his feet disappeared. From a nearby bush, he heard the mewing and gurgling of a certain cat and turkey squabbling.

"Seriously?"

A vein bulged across Jake's forehead as he saw the turkey selfishly trying to gobble up the tentacle like a large earthworm. Crunch was pulling on the other end, barely restraining himself from squashing the bird with his big paw.

The only order he had given them the whole time was to keep their distance and follow him in silence, but it seemed that the sight of the alien octopus had whetted their appetites. Just as the two animals seemed intent on glaring at each other until the end of time, a deadly pressure fell on them and Crunch let go of his tentacle tip.

Nervous, the orange turkey swallowed loudly and the tentacle disappeared into its mouth before getting stuck in its throat. The bird then coughed as Crunch gently patted him on the back with an envious but resentful expression.

"This guy was one of us." Jake informed them sternly, then shook his head in exasperation.

Crunch licked his lips in shame as he learned the truth, but his eyes kept sneaking peeks at the remaining tentacles from time to time, thinking he was subtle enough for his master not to notice. As for the turkey, it was full and had already moved back to its comfortable spot over the cat's back.

If Takoyaki was dead, then the corpses of Diccon and Nicolet were likely to be lying around too. Walking through the corpses, Jake did find Diccon, the short, stocky man from the planet Xor, but not Nicolet.

Walking a little further, he found a corpse different from the others. Its cells were still active and charged with Aether. Their heat had not yet dissipated and even though this body was devoid of soul and bracelet, this corpse had not been left unharmed but cleanly decapitated. Apart from Takoyaki and a few rare Evolvers, few corpses shared this characteristic.

[My guess is that Urul did not manage to neutralize their Death Mark in time or that their Life Force was too strong. When they lost their Soul, the Death Mark strengthened too quickly for him to react.]

Jake agreed with Xi's reasoning, as he also recognized this corpse. It was Albert, the St. Bernard lycan hanging out with Melkree. To be her second in command, he was undoubtedly a strong Fourth-Ordeal Evolver.

Resuming his tracking, Jake encountered more dead Evolvers and Digestors along the way, but was also ambushed numerous times. He was getting tired of these weak monsters and let Crunch and the Orange Turkey vent their frustrations. The plump bird in particular needed physical activity to help him "digest".

Finally, at some point, when the infrastructure entered his field of vision, Jake met his first real enemy. This lone warrior was a Digestor orc like the previous ones, but his silver chitin exoskeleton covered every inch of his body, leaving only a thin horizontal strip of unprotected skin exposing two cruel silver irises. The grey orc held a heavy claymore that skimmed the ground with every movement, raising a cloud of dust.

The Orange Turkey gulped and buried his neck in Crunch's fur hoping to become invisible while Crunch yawned sleepily before lying down under the shade of a tree. He had total confidence in his master.

And Jake didn't disappoint. He flicked two fingers in front of him and a deafening compressed wind bullet rocketed toward the enemy, so fast that the bang of the impact was not heard until after the monster's chest had blown apart.

Jake scratched his head with a confused expression, but just reminded himself that style and power were not necessarily correlated.

[It was an Elite Orc Digestor.] Xi argued, [On this floor, it should be a mini-boss. Look, it dropped something.]

Jake wondered what she was talking about until he noticed a weird spherical crystal with a complex Aether Symbol glowing in it. Not only that, but the helmet had come off the orc's skull, indicating that it was not part of the exoskeleton.

Intrigued, he scanned the two objects and his eyes popped out of his head when he saw their description.

[Aether Skill: Cleave: When activating the skill on a limb or weapon, the sharpness is doubled with a low probability of completely cleaving the target. The effect doubles with each level.]

[Greathelm of the Undying. A helmet generated by a Dungeon Digestor that can be dropped by certain monsters. Its resilience is equal to that of the defeated Digestor's exoskeleton. Attributes : Strength+2, Constitution +7, Perception: +3. Passive Skill : One chance out of two to survive a decapitation.. The helmet is destroyed after the skill is activated.]