

Oracle 578

Chapter 578 - Who's There?

These two unexpected rewards had thrown his plans into complete disarray. For the first time, Jake began to experience in his gut what Crygo, the giant whale, meant. He didn't want to leave this place anymore, despite the enormous risks.

Jake pinched the ugly silver greathelm between his thumb and forefinger and applied some force. The metal chitin immediately deformed, confirming to him that this piece of equipment was just junk for an Evolver of his level. On the other hand, the attributes and Passive Skill bundled with it were not bad.

+7 in Constitution didn't sound like much, but that was based on his own Body Stats. His Myrtharian Body magnified his Body Stats by 8, which meant that a normal sedentary human would have a Body Constitution around 1.25, while a Terran super athlete was unlikely to exceed the 5 point threshold.

Re-scaled from when he was a mere untrained human himself, those 7 points were enough to multiply his toughness, endurance and stamina by at least 5. If they had carried that helmet when they arrived on B842, Jake would have been able to put up a fight against the Nosk in the camp where Tim had lost his mother. Maybe he could have even saved her and the teenager wouldn't be an orphan like he was now.

The helmet's Passive Skill was an odd one, but that kind of probability-dependent effect was perfect for someone like Tim with high luck. Even Jake, if he was wearing this helmet could use his Luck Aether to activate the effect with 100% certainty. It was like having a second life.

The Aether Skill Cleave was more to his liking and suited his fighting style. However, considering the origin of this crystal, he didn't know if assimilating this Aether Symbol was safe.

[It should be fine, but this Aether Symbol is quite big and it doesn't mix well with the Aether Runes from your bloodline. It takes a lot of space.] Xi explained perfunctorily.

Jake lost interest after hearing his AI's answer. He had the basics down after memorizing the entire novice book on Aether Manipulation and caught the underlying meaning.

"I should keep them in the Faction Vault for now." Jake sighed.

Maybe they would be useful to Will, Kyle or Svava. Jake wasn't worried about the other members using it since he had created a separate space for the time of the mission. Even the other important members like the two sisters or his cousins didn't have the proper clearance level.

It was then that he noticed that a spherical crystal like his had already been added to their common storage space. Picking up the crystal, Jake scanned the object and mumbled thoughtfully,

"Devour..."

[They must have gotten it from one of those Taotie Digestors.] Xi said coolly. Sensing his interest, she said, [It's a good skill, but the problem is the same as before. It takes place and won't integrate well with your Bloodline and other Skills.]

"As I thought."

Jake was not disappointed. If his life or the life of one of his comrades was in danger, these Aether Skills could make a difference. Besides, even though it was a real headache to extract an Aether Skill embedded in one's Aether Code, it wasn't impossible. It was just that it was only within the reach of the most skilled Aetherists.

The Aether Runes making up one's Aether Code were innumerable and infinitesimally small. No Earth microscope could observe them, let alone study them. Alien Technologies and powerful Aetherists with monstrous perception and soul were capable of doing so, but it remained an area of expertise reserved for the elite of the elite.

As Jake had already experienced when performing his first Aether and Soul Spells, these Aether Runes and Symbols did not have to be so small. But they required more Aether to exist and occupied space, potentially disrupting the flow of Aether in the body.

He could already tell that while these Aether Skills had the same properties as those displayed in the Oracle Store, they were much cruder in design. If he wanted to use them, Jake would probably have to choose a place in his body to house the Aether Symbol, but that place would be unable to accommodate a second Aether Symbol of similar size, or in other words another Aether Skill.

Still, Jake could probably assimilate several dozen. Several dozen more Aether Skills could really make a difference.

[Don't despair. An Aetherist should be able to miniaturize them with the right equipment. It's much easier to shrink an existing Aether Symbol than to create one from scratch.] Xi consoled him as he stood still.

Jake exhaled slowly and set off again. After a few steps, he spoke his mind,

"I don't get why this Dungeon Digestor is so generous. What does he get out of this?"

[... I can't remember. What I can say is that if the conditions are met it keeps evolving into a calamity. Many Systems fell because of these Dungeons.]

Jake could think of many reasons for this, but he almost always came up with the same scenario. It was that given enough time all the Dungeon Digestors would evolve into omniscient fortresses with invincible armies and eventually go on the offensive.

All this free exp, the Skill and Equipment drops were tempting, but Jake doubted the Oracle was fooled. Even though greedy and egotistical Evolvers were legion, as long as the Overseer at the helm stayed the course there was little to fear.

While corruption was possible and it may happen by accident if a Dungeon went undetected, it was certain that the Oracle and his Guardians had many protocols in place to prevent it.

Jake suddenly froze.

The Corruption?

He had a nagging feeling that he was onto something. Xi said nothing, confirming that she also shared his hunch.

Right now, he felt himself, but a shudder of foreboding still made his blood run cold.

"We need to leave this place."

Although Jake said that, he quickened his pace toward the infrastructure. He encountered no other Elite Digestors, but several other victims of Urul Tak. The groups were eclectic, indicating that many temporary alliances had been formed when these factions had been broken up.

At some point, Jake reached the structure hidden by the forest canopy and could finally see what it was.

It was another spiral rocky promontory resembling the mountain on the surface where they had come in, but much smaller in size. Rudimentary dwellings made of clay and thatch had been erected all around, as well as a sort of primitive castle on the hillside.

This castle was more a pile of roughly hewn rocks than a true architectural construction, but it had been done with enough care that the whole thing held together. The infrastructure he thought he had seen in the distance when he landed in this cave was simply the multiple stone watchtowers growing like menhirs all around the spiral rocky cone.

Ashen wooden palisades cordoned off a large area around this camp, preventing outsiders from entering. This was obviously one of these Digestors' headquarters, but he didn't know which species it was.

Along the way, Jake had seen goblins killing each other, orcs fighting other orcs, and sometimes even hybrid armies confronting each other. Based on his findings, each of these rocky promontories was home to a different tribe and if his instincts weren't wrong, the passageway to the lower level.

What surprised him, on the other hand, was the absence of noise. These goblin and orc Digestors weren't exactly the quiet type and they were fond of expressing their existence in the most obscene and depraved ways possible. Jake didn't know that Digestors could defecate until now, but after twice avoiding stepping in silver poop, he was well aware.

Sniffing the air, Jake caught the smell of blood. Not Digestor blood, but human blood. There was also a sweet fragrance wafting through the air.

Cautiously, he left the protective edge of the forest and glided stealthily into the camp. Once he reached the palisades, Jake glanced over and saw the bloodbath he had mentally prepared for.

Goblin and orc Digestors corpses everywhere. A dozen of these goblins looked like the goblin generals who had wreaked havoc on the Nawai warriors serving Bhuzkoc, and their mounts lay beside them. Several orcs in armor like the one Jake had defeated also lay among the dead. Farther on, at the entrance to a tunnel cut into the rocky promontory, lay the huge but bloody corpse of a huge ogre-like creature.

In addition to all these monsters, there were also a bunch of aliens, humans and other colorful creatures that didn't swear by batrachian gray and silver sheen. A noteworthy element was the decrepit sapling with withered leaves that was standing near one of the huts.

As expected, all the survivors were heading in the same direction. There were a fair number of Fourth-Ordeal Evolvers among them, but the odds were stacked against them. As Jake pieced together the

facts, he quickly concluded that when they reached the camp, they had bumped into Urul Tak, who had made short work of them.

Among the victims, Jake recognized several Shyrils, but Shaktilar was not on the list. He also found several Myrtharian Nerds, which only darkened his mood.

He did, however, identify most of Melkree's officers. Counting the corpses he had previously listed along the way, the faction leader had lost most of her forces.

With the Digestor boss killed and no sign of Urul or his own companions, Jake decided he might as well head for the lower level.

As he was about to enter this new tunnel, he smelled the sweet odor mingling with the metallic smell of blood from the other corpses again and paused.

"Who's there?"