

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 34 - Let's go for a hike.

'Planet B842, is that where I am?' Jake asked with a calmness that surprised even him.

[Indeed. You're on your own now. Hopefully, there are other humans around, but don't count on it.] Xi cooled his hopes.

Jake took a deep breath, packed his things with resolution, then hesitantly opened the front door of his home. It opened directly onto a sand dune. The hallway, the stairs, the doors leading to his neighbors' apartments, everything was gone.

The city around him was gone, and if he vaguely recognized a familiar skyscraper in the distance, the similarity stopped there. Half a kilometre radius around the building he was standing on, water, only water. His apartment literally stood on a mound of sand.

And beyond that, sand dunes interspersed with fir forests. Somewhere in between, a snow-covered hill. And at the top of it a vertical ray of blue light linking heaven and earth. Fortunately, the sky remained uniformly blue. He couldn't bear to see a blizzard under such a hot sky.

Stretching his muscles tense from all that stress, he congratulated himself for being so well prepared. The main drawback, however, was that he would have to swim out of the island. The water in the micro lake around him was muddy and smelled of rotting algae. Not really the ideal pool where he was planning to do laps.

Luckily his apartment survived in one piece. Simple, yet modern furniture. With his paranoid instincts, he had been prepared for all sorts of situations, including this one.

Poking around in one of his closets, he found an inflatable boat he didn't hope to use one day. So a nonchalant Jake inflated his boat by rhythmically pushing the air pump with his foot.

After a few minutes a beautiful yellow plastic boat was ready to go out to sea. Or rather, in the mud. He had even planned the paddles. Genius.

'You're lucky that you're smart, Jake.' He congratulated himself, speaking aloud.

[Don't get too excited. After almost four months of taking a Path teaching you how to survive, it would have been disappointing otherwise.] Xi rebutted, bringing him down a peg.

Before throwing himself into the unknown, Jake checked his Status.

[Specie: Homo sapiens (Primitive humanoid specie)]

[Age:25]

[Height: 180cm]

[Weight: 80kg]

[Health: Healthy]

[Strength: 16.3 points/ (Normal male: 10 points).

[Agility: 14.2 points (Normal male: 10 points).

[Constitution: 16.2 points (Normal male: 9 points).

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[Intelligence: 15.1 points (Normal male: 10 points).

[Perception: 10.6 points (Normal male: 10 points).

[Knowledge and Skill Masteries:]

[Informatics: 76 points (Normal human: 8 points). Intermediate]

[Cyber engineering: 51 points (Normal human: 1 points). Intermediate]

[Communication: 9 points (Normal human: 10 points). Novice. Still asocial, but at least you can express yourself properly.]

[Fighting: 32 points (Normal people: 5 points). Novice. You know the theory, and fought against a few Digestors. Unfortunately, these Digestors were too weak and always attacked by surprise. Don't think you're good. You're not.]

[Cooking: 34 points (Normal human: 4 points). Novice. Still not a chef, but you can be trusted in the kitchen.]

[Survival: 46 points (Normal human: 5 points). Novice. The theory is in your head, all you need is practice.]

[Firearms: 14 points (Normal human: 1 points). Novice. At least you won't get hurt. You know the theory, but you have never shot anything, even if you've rehearsed.]

[Edged weapons: 22 (Normal human: 4 points). Novice. You've been practicing, and you cut up some Digestors last month. But it was your brute force that did all the work.]

His body tempered by months of intensive training had nothing in common with his former physique and his stats reflected this.

He was not yet at the level of an Olympic athlete, but he was now undoubtedly in the top 1%.

His strength was all-rounded but more on the explosive side. He had gained in flexibility, balance and coordination, but his reaction time hadn't improved much, except for a few reflexes.

His intelligence had been plateauing for a while. He was probably not far from his biological limit. Perception was hard to improve, but he still had modest results. With the effect of his diet, his eyesight and hearing were slightly better.

‘Xi, How much Aether do we have?’

[After 3 months of accumulation, and 8 Digestors lv10, about 4 points. The last three were close to rank 1.] Replied Xi, with a formal tone.

Jake shivered as he remembered his fight with the last Digestor. A disgusting, half-plucked raven had hammered his window with his beak until it cracked. Cawing as if he owed him money, the monster had headbutted the crack until its head passed through it. The bird was big and heavy enough to make an eagle jealous.

Partially flabbergasted, Jake had fetched his fancy katana in panic, then stroked down with all his might, decapitating the crow in one blow. He had put so much strength into the stroke that the carbon katana had been chipped.

Since then, he had been content with his machete and knife. It wasn't as beautiful, but it did the job for a savage like him. Plus it was easy to maintain.

He pondered long and hard, weighing the pros and cons before making a decision. He absolutely could not take the risk of venturing into this new world without using all his cards.

He would feel terrible if he got munched by a Digestor or something else because he hadn't used up all his Aether points. Well, not really, since he would probably be dead.

The main risk at his level was to react too slowly. A fly didn't have any strength or mastery of martial arts, but time went four times slower for them. That way, it could easily avoid the fly swatter.

Even after all that time working out, his subattribute 'Reaction Time' composing Intelligence and Agility was still at 10 points like any healthy human. Even the

greatest martial arts masters had a normal reaction time. What changed was their reflexes.

‘Xi, encodes two points of Aether agility.’ Jake ordered confidently.

[Your wish is my command.] Xi responded, Jake imagining her at that moment taking a cute stand at attention.

He immediately felt the difference, as if his whole body had just been rewired, the cable suddenly replaced by fiber optics.

He felt suppler, more flexible. The ripples of the mud around him had slowed down, as had his breathing. When he tried to move at his usual pace, he felt additional resistance, as if his muscles had to work harder. They did, because he was actually moving faster.

It took him a good half an hour to adjust to these changes. He would probably feel that the people talking to him were slower, but the good news was that at least for the moment he was alone.

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At his destination, he landed cautiously so as not to overturn his boat at the last second. The white sand and the few palm trees around him reminded him of the beaches of the Caribbean. The change of scenery caught him off guard, but he did not linger any longer on this incongruity. Everything that had happened to him since waking up was incongruous anyway.

Dropping off his supplies from the boat, he formed a mound under the shade at the foot of one of the palm trees, and then recapitulated what he remembered of the

landscape he had memorized of the islet. Here the only compass that worked was the Oracle.

Searching north from the sun, the magnetic field or the stars would be a waste of time. Not only because there were three suns, but also because it didn't matter. The surroundings and probably the climate also changed from one area to another.

Ideally, all he had to do was to meet the other humans who had been suckèd in at the same time as him. Or better yet, those who had arrived before him. Deep down, despite his individualism, he hoped that his family and friends were well.

Luckily, there was a direction that was not random. That of the snow-covered hill and its ray of blue light. From his point of view, it was a signal left for him and he hoped that other humans in the area would think like him. Moreover, the Oracle confirmed his choice.

He estimated the distance to be about 20 kilometres at the most. That was about three hours of brisk walking. Four or five if he took his time.

Ignoring the dangers he might face, Jake chose to preserve his endurance. In this case, his pack would already tire him considerably.

‘Something I should be concerned about, Xi?’ Jake asked one last time before setting off.

[Hmmm, pay attention to the Cubes.] She answered in a cryptic tone.