

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 35 - Nice to meet you

‘The Cubes?’ Jake repeated stupidly, wondering what a cube could do in a place like this.

[The Cubes, no matter what their color or size, are vital to anyone who wants to thrive here.] Xi clarified. [You’ll understand when you encounter one.] She added.

At that moment, Crunch, who was sunbathing in the inflatable boat, suddenly straightened up, its hairs pulled up. Searching for its master, it came to rub Jake’s legs while purring, apparently needing to be comforted.

Jake, on the other hand, had no one to rub himself with to feel better, except perhaps the palm tree behind him.

BANG BANG

Sounds of gunfire echoed in the distance. With the echo, it was difficult to determine how far away the shot was fired. But it came from the direction of the snow-covered hill with the blue light stream.

In another context, he would have fled in the opposite direction, but here it was rather good news. It meant that at least he wasn’t the only human being around.

He immediately set out to reach the area where the shots were fired. If the person(s) there turned out to be suspicious, there was nothing hindering him from continuing on his way alone afterwards.

Loaded like a mule, he also had to be careful that Crunch didn't lose sight of him. Luckily for him, the cat followed him like a small hound. Once in a while, its Highness would stop to urinate against a tree or sniff some feces belonging to who knows what mammal. Thus occupied, he shortened the distance quickly.

Barely two kilometers later, he had to stop when a piercing scream ejected him from his state of concentration. The shrill sound had sent shivers down his spine, an emotion so intense that he had only felt it once before: When he met his first Digestor...

Crouching stealthily in the ferns at the foot of a fir tree, he cautiously laid down his package and clutched the handle of his machete to the point of whitening his phalanges. The ferns in the direction of the noise began to rustle in front of him, then were jostled by an alien form literally scaring him stiff.

A vpqfrmat hzufopzu qmzu ovfr ojm quouzl ofii jaov f jmmtw gmtw frt ezfw lcar, laqaiFz om ovfo md f gfozfHvafr, lommt ar dzmro md vaq, hfhciare ovfo lfqu aromiuZfgiu lvzaii Imprt. Iol pnnuz iaqgl juzu ovar frt imre, urtare ar dareuzl laqaiFz om giftul md iaypat laisuz, hvfreare lvfnu arhullfroiW, lmquoaqul ofcare ovu lvfnu md ovu duZrl, lmquoaqul ovmlu md hifjl mZ vmmsul.

The lower limbs, on the contrary, were muscular and covered with chitin, reminiscent of the legs of an insect. A long tail similar to that of a mouse twice its size, but with a metallic sheen and cutting the bushes behind it as it swayed. As for its head, a tiny skull, comprising a large bulging eye with a slit pupil and a jaw with sharp fangs that seemed to be able to extend infinitely like a python. At times, the eye would glow with a halo of white light. A creature of nightmares.

'Holy shit... What the hell is this thing?!' Jake mumbled between his clenched teeth, barely holding back from screaming.

[A Digestor rank 2] Warned Xi. [Very dangerous for you at your current level. I recommend opening fire immediately.]

Realizing the cold sweat running down his back, a white anger filled Jake. He was just beginning to overcome his nightmares when an even uglier Digestor showed up in front of him.

All his preparation was dictated only by his instinct for survival and the idea of facing animals or humans similar to those on Earth. He knew nothing about these aliens, and so chose not to paralyze his thinking with unnecessary fear. But this monstrous creature, at least he knew he was no match for it.

He knew in his gut that if it realized he was there, his carcass would soon end up in carpaccio. On the other hand, he had the intimate certainty that escape was impossible. His speed would be useless in the face of such a beast. The only solution was to fight.

Overcoming his fear, he clutched his machete even tighter and left his fern hiding place. Upon noticing it, the creature uttered a jubilant howl, as if Christmas had come a month early. Frowning, Jake took the opportunity to also point his semi-automatic pistol at the creature's forehead.

The man and the beast stared at each other in the whites of their eyes for a moment that seemed eternal to the young man, and then the calm was broken. The creature roared vindictively and charged, his liquid fingers taking on the same shape as his machete.

Not to be outdone, Jake took a deep breath and pulled the trigger on his gun. The skin on its forehead, which he thought was fragile, only cracked on contact with the two bullets that struck its skull. Nevertheless, the violence of the shock caused the creature to waltz backwards, stopping its momentum.

Fmz f qmquro, Jfcu jfl lpznZalut gw val mjr nzuhalamr. Tvu ojm nmarol md Auovuz ar feaiaow vft aqnzmsut val zuffhoamr oaqu, fl juii fl val hmmztarfoamr, tukouzaow frt gmtw hmrozmi. Tvu pruknuhout hmrluypurhu jfl ovfo vu lptturiw vft f tudo omphv. Hal dazlo lvmol vft zuffhvut ovu ofzeuo jaovmpo f vaohv.

To save his bullets, he then took advantage of this respite to rush the monster. A long sharp tail whistled to his left, which he avoided by bending forward without stopping. Then he deflected one of the blades that served as the creature's hand with his machete.

Feeling his knuckles crack, he realized that a weaker man would have fractured his wrist trying this manoeuvre. The creature had incredible strength.

He continued his approach and, when he was close enough, leapt with his pistol in hand into the monster's face. He then released the entire magazine after sticking the tip of his gun where the first two bullets had cracked the creature's chitinous skin.

In an agonizing death rattle, the creature's blades took on the shape of sharp fingers, then squeezed him with all their might, crushing his ribs and slashing him from all sides. Without his Kevlar vest, he would have been long dead by now.

Just as stubbornly, Jake flexed his muscles like a madman to resist the pressure and began to strangle the beast, not knowing whether or not the life form needed to breathe.

At last, after two long infernal minutes, the monster uttered a last death rattle and the halo of white light in its eyes faded away. The pressure of its sharp fingers eased as they liquefied and Jake was finally able to catch his breath.

His ribs had held, but numerous cuts covered his body and his torn clothes were now stained with his blood and the silvery blood of his victim. It would take him several days to recover, but at least his movements would not be impeded.

A fracture would probably have condemned him to such a place. As for his kevlar vest, it was good for the trash, but he didn't throw it away. After all, it had saved his life, and however damaged it was, it still provided substantial protection.

Slipping on the floor to catch his breath, a luminous glow caught the attention of his eye. A tiny, static flash of pure white had sprouted from the creature's forehead

just where he had pierced its skull with his gun. Realizing that he was seeing a manifestation of Aether for the first time, he grazed it with his fingertips as he caught his breath.

[Don't do that.] Xi yelled.

Too late. Since he never saw Aether before, he had never realized Compress and Encode were not automatic. Immediately, a changed state of consciousness overtook him, and he knew right away that he couldn't turn back.

Ceasing to lose himself in useless reflections, he knew instinctively how to absorb this concentrate of Aether. Focusing his attention on the foreign energy that was emitting a harmoniously high and low-pitched sound at the same time, the same shrill sound as the creature, but much weaker, resounded in his head.

A sudden migraine invaded him, giving him the impression of an overflow passing through an insufficiently wide duct. His own Aether and the Digestor's began to merge, and for a brief moment he felt a feeling of intoxication he never thought possible. The intoxication of life, but also other darker emotions.

The urge to devour all creatures, including humans. When memories that were not his own passed through his mind, he realized that these emotions were not his own. They were those of the creature of which he was assimilating the Aether and obviously a fraction of its thoughts.

This monster was rather stupid, but the bits of memories gave him the feeling that he could control his vital functions much more finely. Perhaps with more memories, he could have figured out how to change the shape of his limbs.

Unconsciously, he understood what raw Aether like this could do and what he would gain by growing it. Although it was not yet clear in his mind, he understood that it would make him stronger and increase his chances of survival.

He also understood that those memories that were not his own would eventually change him deeply if he was not careful. Fortunately, he had only glimpsed a sliver of the creature's thoughts.

The creature's mind was simple and primitive, easy to dominate and put into perspective. He didn't know what would happen if the monster had an intelligence superior to his own.

When the assimilation of the Aether was complete, Jake returned to his usual calm state. He felt pleasantly rested despite his blood loss, a gift from his duel to the death with the monster.

A duj qarpoul ifouz, vu nfardpiiw zuopzrut om val nfhc, ezpqgiare dzmq ovu nfar, ovur fdouz nmcare fzmprt ar ao dmZ f jvaiu, npiiut mpo f talarduhofro lmipoamr, gfrtfeul, frt louzaiu hmqnzullul frt guefr om fnniw val dazlo fat iullmrl om nfohv vaqluid pn. Ar arduhoamr dfz dzmq hasaiaxfoamr jmpit laeradahfroiw zutphu val hvfrhul md lpzsasfi.

Unfortunately, although his ribs were not broken, they were painful, perhaps cracked. His chances against another monster like this one would be much darker.

'Damn it, I'm on that damn planet for less than an hour and I'm already in bad shape.' Jake sighed as he was taking a bite out of a high-protein bar to recharge his batteries.

He didn't even realize at the time that he had just slaughtered without batting an eyebrow a monster that would have filled his nightmares a moment earlier.