

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 36 - I feel different

The battle had been brief but intense and the blood loss was gradually being felt. He calmly chewed on his protein bar, clenching his teeth from time to time, trying to ignore the pain.

Luckily, his trusty cat Crunch, who was nowhere in sight at the time of his battle with the Digestor, came to rub him for comfort. Or not.

Instead, Crunch cautiously approached the corpse, then sniffed it carefully. After a few paw strokes to test the temperature, the pet began licking its lips.

‘Xi, is it edible?’ Jake investigated, not convinced that something like this could taste good.

[It depends. Once the Aether is extracted, it is just dead flesh. But it might not be a carbon-based life form, or it might be poison to species from Earth. Either way, if the cat is tempted, maybe it is safe to eat.]

[You can taste a small amount and check for changes in your health via the Oracle.] She advised.

Jake had forgotten that he could test the effect of an herb, medicine, or novel food simply by looking at the changes in Status that it caused. He tended not to pay attention to it, but it gave all kinds of information, from blood pH to hormone levels.

[I also want to warn you.] Xi resumed with an accusing tone in her voice.

[Don't ever do what you just did again. Uncompressed Aether from a Digestor corrupts. They don't need to bite you or infect you to make you a Digestor. Just absorbing their excess Aether is enough.]

[Even if you don't become one, you won't be the same. The same goes for other life forms, including humans. Remember my soul briefing? For non-evolved life forms, the soul is not stable after death and dissipates quickly. It's different with the Aether. It can hold for a while. Unlike the Earthlings, the Aetheric code of a Digestor is very sophisticated, even a Rank 2.]

[You have literally absorbed a fraction of a Digestor's soul. Don't forget that. Your Aetheric code has already changed. It may seem epic when you put it that way, but absorb the Aether from hundreds of chickens and one day you'll wake up believing you're one.]

Xi's words gave him a chill. He had learned his lesson. Still, he didn't feel responsible for his mistake. If she had informed him earlier about the risks, or the process for compressing the Aether, he would not have acted so rashly.

[Don't ask me why. I don't know.] Xi apologized, glad she didn't have a flesh-and-blood body or she would have had a migraine by now.

[All I can say is that they've activated the 'Aether Vision' feature, normally only available at Authority rank 3. That's why you could see this simplified representation of the Aether. So Compress and Encode, which were automatic until now, have been disabled. You can reactivate them with a single thought.]

Jake couldn't understand how much of the Oracle's system depended on an AI, and how much depended on the decisions of individuals. Nevertheless, he reactivated both functions.

[No one knows. But decisions about planets like this are usually made by a single Oracle Overseer. They are the Oracle's sycophants, and are usually failures or

deserters on the scale of the entire Mirror Universe. But on the planets under their jurisdiction they are Gods.]

Xi seemed to have a certain hatred towards these representatives. For an AI who was supposed to have no emotions of her own it was more than surprising. But it had been a long time since Jake realized that she was much more than that.

[At least the Oracle Overseer seems fair. Seeing the Aether has its advantages. What you did earlier, in moderation, can save your life.] Xi toned down what she said before.

In any case, putting his injuries aside, he was in a pretty good mood. His Authority Level hadn't suddenly jumped to Rank 3 just because he had defeated a Digestor lvl2.

According to Xi, only the murder of the first Digestor would allow him to pass Rank 1 by skipping all other prerequisites. The main reason was because the Oracle distinguished civilians from fighters by this simple feat.

The real reason, however, was that killing a Digestor lvl 0 gave between 100 and 500 points. This was enough to fill the 100 point gauge of Rank 0.

When a level was reached, the excess points were just wasted. Moving up to higher ranks usually required a lot of preparation beforehand.

Waov ovu 7 Daeulomzl vu vft caiiut ar ovu iflo ovzuu qmrovl, vu vft fhhpqpifout fgmpo 2100 nmarol. Waov ovu mru vu vft bplo caiiut vu vft 5200/10000 nmarol.

A Digestor lvl 1 was worth between 500 and 2000 points, while a lvl 2 was worth between 2000 and 5000. So the monster he killed was a lightweight...

The reason why a Digestor could be worth as much as a higher ranked Digestor was because some of them couldn't evolve, but that didn't stop them from continuing to grow and accumulate Aether.

It had already been said, but Jake was oddly well. His wounds no longer hurt and he, who an hour earlier was under stress, felt nothing but serenity and slight exhilaration.

The sounds seemed to resonate more strongly. He could discern more colours, and the air was enriched with new smells. His thoughts were clearer, and despite his potentially cracked ribs, he felt stronger than ever.

‘There’s something wrong.’ Jake said, frowning, with a slight doubt.

[Take a look at your Aether Status.] Xi hinted.

When Jake did what Xi asked, he was stunned by his new status for a while. His Aether, which had been 10 points overall except for a 12 in Agility, now looked like this:

[Aether Status:]

[Strength(S): 12 points]

[Agility(A): 13 points]

[Constitution(C): 13 points]

[Vitality(V): 13 points]

[Intelligence(I): 11 points]

[Perception(P): 10.5 points]

‘But, but why?’ He stammered, not understanding such a difference. With Encode he would have needed 72 Aether points to get those statistics.

[You have forgotten since it was three months ago.] Xi intervened, refreshing his memory. [When the Oracle in your bracelet compresses the Aether to purify it and make it usable, 95% of the Aether is lost. It was a Digestor lvl 2. With Compress, you would have gotten 3 or 4 points.]

[This unfortunately has effects that go beyond the Aether. Your body should also have benefited, as you can feel it on your mood. The genetic consequences are negligible with such a weak Digestor, but you must not do it again]

[For now anyway, it's a blessing. Whatever the consequences, you need to be alive to complain about them.]

And indeed, when Jake checked his physical status, there were some changes.

[Sozureov(S): 19.3(+3) nmarol.]

[Agility(A): 15.5(+1.3) points]

[Constitution(C): 19.2(+3) points]

[Vitality(V): 19.6(+3) points]

[Intelligence(I): 16.1(+1) points]

[Perception(P): 11.6(+1) points]

Fun fact, he was also 1 cm taller and 2kg heavier. Aether and body were two different concepts but their effects were strongly intertwined. With 13 points in Aether Vitality and Constitution, and close to 20 with his flesh body, his effective toughness, stamina and regeneration were now about 3 times those of the average man. Mindblowing.

No wonder his ribs didn't hurt so much anymore.

After that, the young man took advantage of his renewed strength to dissect the creature that had nearly ended his life. The Oracle had bombarded him with survival lessons, and it was time to put them into practice.

Using his military knife, he methodically cut and studied the monster, while continuing to eat in between moments of hesitation as to what to do next.

Oru jmpit vfsu ovmpveo ovfo f rmzqfi artasatpfi iasare ar f qmtuzr lmhauow jmpit gu rfplumpl ar ovu dfhu md lphv hfzrfeu, gpo rmo Jfcu. Buhfplu vu jfl loaii ar f

lofou md lvmhc, mZ guhfplu md ovu Auovuz vu vft fglmzgut, vu jfl upnvmzah arlouft md guare rfplufout gw ovu gpohvuzw fzmprt vaq.

In the end, the internal anatomy being very similar to that of any other mammal, despite the blood and silvery flesh, he felt that the beast was surely edible.

Taking a bottle and a Tupperware out of the bag, he retrieved a portion of the blood and silvery flesh to test its edibility later. He still tasted the blood from his lips, to get a first idea. A characteristic metallic taste, but also slightly sweet.

If he didn't turn in his guts in the next few hours, he could gradually try to consume it. The iron and other nutrients would help him to renew the lost blood more quickly.

Anyway, Crunch hadn't waited for him and chewed an unidentified piece of guts a bit further on. Well, he didn't even need to test anymore, he could just watch the cat... So stupid.

Leaving the creature's remains to rot in the sun, Jake walked away calmly, but much more scowling than before. He now knew that there were silver monsters lurking around him, and this greatly reduced the chances of meeting other survivors.

How many could claim to be as athletic as he was? How many had the presence of mind to carry a weapon when they were teleported here? Just by asking the question aloud, he guessed the answer.

Probably not many. And if he looked at those who could use such weapons, the chances of survival were even lower.

Walking as cautiously and silently as possible, he swallowed the rest of the distance to reach the snowy hill where the blue light signal attracted him.

The transition from a scorching heat to a polar cold was particularly unpleasant, but by clenching his teeth and putting on his jacket and scarf, he quickly regained his tranquility.

Hu hiaqgut limjiw pn ovu vaii, guare jfzw md lpttur hvfreul ar ovu ursazmrquro. Bpo val talozplo jfl qalnifhut. Hu urhmprouzut rmovare lplnahampl tpzare ovu zulo md val hiaqg frt arlouft urbmwut val jfic ar ovu lrmj frt ovu ahw jart jvannare val dfhu. Hal gufzt frt val rueiuhout qfru fhout fl fr ukhuiuuro ovuzqfi arlpifomz.

When Jake finally reached the top, a new view opened up for him.

The first thing he noticed was the blue light gushing up to the sky from a kind of crater. The snow was flowing back in the opposite direction. The second thing he noticed was a group of humans staring at him in a frightened way.