

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 44 - Private

After two long hours of harvesting, the sun had long since passed its zenith and the foliage in the heart of the forest was thicker than ever, clearly diminishing the luminosity.

Jake wondered how there could be suns orbiting B842. Were the stars being absorbed at the same time to form a few huge stars, or were there other secrets behind this phenomenon?

He didn't have time to meditate on this question any further because at that very moment a shrill whimper brought him out of his torpor. Recognizing this sinister war shriek, he adopted the posture of a soldier on the lookout.

Slowly he laid down his pack, pulled out his machete and his semi-automatic, before crouching down silently. Will and Amy didn't dare make a sound either, knowing that a tiny mistake on their part would send them to the cemetery. In their previous group, nearly half of them had been murdered by one of these creatures.

As for Crunch, who until now had been peacefully chewing on some alien catnip, he waddled at full speed to his master in search of a safe position. For a former alley cat, and with the help of his Oracle, he had developed good self-preservation instincts.

Focusing his attention on the noise, Jake cautiously observed the translucent monster coming out of the bushes. This Digestor was about a head smaller than he was and much less threatening and muscular than the one he had faced.

The creature was on all fours rather than standing, although its morphology indicated that it could surely use bipedalism. The chitin on its lower legs was paler and less robust, the metal ends of its arms did not change shape incessantly, now resembling two scythes, and the white glow in its eye was less sustained. To top it all off, it looked more stupid, displaying the rich expression of a sea anemone.

Taking no chances, Jake calmly aimed at the creature's eye and fired. The bullet passed easily through the eye of the creature, piercing half of its skull in the process.

The Digestor fell dead into the ferns and a small flash of Aether appeared above the remains. Surprised by this easy victory, he burst out laughing, which shocked his two companions, who had not seen him express any emotion since they had met him.

But there, without a doubt, there was joy on his face. And they understood that emotion. After all, this same creature had slaughtered half of their previous group, and watching as Jake got rid of it, it looked so weak.

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He decided to keep his Aether in order to increase his possibilities. If he invested his Aether points in strength whenever he could, he felt that he would sooner or later pay the price for this imbalance.

Even if Strength Aether was encoded so that the power was usable, that is, without harming himself, it did not mean that it could supplant Constitution Aether.

For example, even a normal human could strike with all his might into a lead wall, but he would surely injure his hand. Similarly, if he became strong enough to leap 20 meters high, the landing would probably be fatal.

Amy and Will were torn between relief and jealousy. They watched the process without saying a word, but there was a certain envy on their faces. Too bad they weren't capable of accomplishing such a feat.

Resuming their progression, the shrill cackling became more frequent and more insistent. They were heading towards what appeared to be a nest, but clearly Jake had no intention of turning back, much to Amy and Will's chagrin.

It wasn't that he didn't want to. The problem was that no path was safer according to his Oracle device. Since their arrival on B842, the Oracle was not foolproof anymore because it couldn't predict the Digestors' movements. However, this was without relying on the Oracle's ingenuity.

Each living being equipped with an Oracle represented as many different eyes for the System. Jake didn't know it, but the trees and shrubs all carried an Oracle device on B842. While not perfect, it made the Prediction function pretty much workable.

After a few minutes, what they feared happened. Three Digestors identical to the one who had just died surrounded them, coming out of nowhere out of the tall grass.

They loved tall grass and ferns, Jake realized. Everything he had encountered so far had ambushed him as he stepped out of one of those grasses. It was probably to protect them from other, more threatening predators, or it was a hunting method they were fond of.

Svmmoare ovu mru rufz Aqw frt Waii jaov f gpuiuo ar ovu lcpui, vu qmrmnmiaxut ovu foouroamr md ovu movuz ojm gw zplvare omjftzl ovuq, qfhvuou ar vfrt.

The targeted Digester straightened up on his hind legs, suddenly becoming as tall as Jake, and then shot his two scythes, which served as arms on him, in a manner similar to a rabid gorilla pounding the ground.

Far from being agitated, Jake spotted a gap in the monster's guard and cut off one of the arms with a satisfied look, before suddenly diving down to avoid the scythe of the second monster, which had joined them.

The pain of having his arm ripped off made the injured Digestor scream, hurting the eardrums of all three humans.

'How was I supposed to know they were that pissed off when you didn't finish them off on the first try...' Jake cursed, clenching his teeth because of the pain in his ears.

Determined to silence the creature once and for all, he spun around, then charged and jumped, decapitating the monster with an almost invisible movement of his machete. The Digestor's head fell to the ground, a stream of silvery blood spurting from the monster's neck.

The second monster uttered a shrill cry of rage, but it was too late. Using the monster's carcass to conceal himself, Jake impaled the creature with his weapon, wounding it mortally. He then chopped off its head in turn.

Seeing the three dead bodies on the ground, Jake mentally noted that the fight had been much harder than expected. He was risking his life here. He couldn't afford to underestimate the creatures of this world.

He also realized that absorbing the Aether from a Digestor lvl2 directly had indeed affected his personality. When they confronted these Digestors, he was deadly calm from beginning to end. To be quite honest, he had enjoyed it.

Anyway, if the side effects were limited to that, it was almost a good thing considering that fear and indecision had no place here. He just had to be careful with those symptoms.

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[Authority Level: Private (rank 2) 0/ 100,000]

No new features appeared to have been unlocked, but he would have to ask Xi for more details when the situation was calmer. The military rank was intriguing, but Private was still a ridiculously low grade in every culture he knew. In any case, four more promotions and he'd have his diplomatic immunity for good.

He felt more confident now to face a Digestor lvl2 like the one he had faced when he arrived on B842. 6 Aether points could be converted into 6 Strength Aether or 3 Agility Aether points. In both cases, his combat prowess would be propelled to the next stage.

This time Amy and Will's jealousy was physically palpable, but he ignored them. He had already told them he wouldn't help them. However, he was not unfair either.

Realizing that they couldn't accomplish anything with their bare hands, he began to dissect the three monsters this time, under the disgusted gaze of his two fellow travelers.

The silver scythes at the end of their arms looked like the blades of a saber. Almost 70cm long, double-edged, with a sturdiness and appearance comparable to steel, the quality of these were indisputable.

Sectioning the arms where the scythes stopped, he then took care of making suitable handles. Extracting the femurs from the three creatures, it took him almost an hour just to separate them from the carcass and then cleanse them of the monsters' flesh and other bodily fluids.

Beginning to understand what he was trying to accomplish, Amy and Will watched the procedure with interest, curiosity overriding the anguish that the shrill cackles around them continued to fuel.

As for Crunch, he hadn't lost his mind either. The cat was enjoying a good raw leg of Digestor, completely indifferent to the bloody show his master was responsible for.

The difference wasn't perceptible yet, but with every bite the cat grew and his eyes sparkled with a little more intelligence, which consequently helped him to better follow the advice of his Oracle Device. Its overall size was little affected yet, but its claws were already much sharper, capable of causing serious lacerations.