

The Oracle Paths

Volume 5: The Last Tutorial

Chapter 516 - Diversion

‘You shouldn’t have stood up to Grosh.’ The balding man sighed with a sympathetic look of mixed anxiety and despair. ‘He’s not the strongest around here, but he’s known for his cruelty. For refugees like us, this place is the only one that will take us in, but I can see that you are different. You’re not afraid.’

Jake calmly inspected the warm, albeit fearful, attitude of this emaciated man toward him as well as that of the other two humans. He also glanced fleetingly at the other aliens within the group, but he had neither the time nor the inclination to pay attention to them.

He had not forgotten the purpose of his presence here. Accepting the human’s compliment, he immediately bombarded him with questions.

‘Why do you want to leave here? Is there always such a crowd gathered in front of the inner shelter barrier, or has something exceptional happened recently that caused this change?’

Not expecting these questions at all, an incredulous stupor strained the refugee’s face. He was not the only one. The young woman, the teenager and the other aliens reacted in exactly the same way. Even the creature that looked like a cross between a bison and a horse suddenly bulged out his eyes.

‘You, you don’t know what’s going on here?’ The man stammered in shock. ‘No disrespect, but if you’re not here for that, what the hell are you doing here? You should get out while you still can!’

Jake was somewhat taken aback by the man’s selfless reaction. Despite his obvious distress, he was urging him to leave as quickly as possible without concern for their own plight. It was rare to see such benevolence.

‘Tell me instead what’s going on here so I can judge for myself.’ He asked patiently.

‘Very well...’ The refugee still found it hard to believe, but he did his best to fill him in. ‘It started two weeks ago. A Rank 9 Digestor attacked the Shelter overnight. The Black Cube’s walls quaked, but the shields held. The Oracle Drones were able to repel the Digestor, but not kill it. With the nearest Oracle Guardians reportedly already mobilized elsewhere for some mysterious reason, an extermination mission was opened in the Player and Evolver Halls and other more powerful Evolvers soon arrived.’

Jake listened intently to the balding man’s account, but he couldn’t help but feel dubious. A Rank 9 Digestor was a formidable foe, even for him, but it shouldn’t have been much of a problem for the Oracle and the other Evolvers with four to six Ordeals under their belt. Especially if they cooperated and used sufficiently advanced military technology. Such Evolvers were still rare on B842, but statistically speaking there were bound to be some.

His reasoning was not too far from the truth. Such Evolvers had indeed been lured into the Shelter because of the mission’s promises, but only 7 had answered the call. Apparently, not many people were willing to go to this godforsaken place, even when the rewards offered were adequate.

Still, those 7 Evolvers should have been enough to exterminate this monster. If they had properly read the mission details, they should have known exactly what type of Digestor they were dealing with and should have had some confidence in their ability to defeat the creature. So why did they still want to get out of here so quickly?

The refugee confirmed Jake's suspicions in the next part of his story,

'These seven Evolvers chased the Rank 9 Digestor. In addition to these seven warriors, they were accompanied by a large military force and most of the local Evolvers and tyrants who wanted to witness the extermination of such a monster. They tracked it down for several days and finally found its lair in an underground cave. The area was predictably infested with Digestors, but that didn't intimidate them. The battle lasted several hours and tens of thousands of Digestors were slaughtered. The seven Evolvers took on the Rank 9 Digestor and emerged victorious with the monster's head.

'At that moment, everyone thought the problem was solved. The corpses were dissected, the blood was collected and everyone went home a little richer than before. Those seven Evolvers were only interested in the carcass of the Rank 9 Digestor and they graciously left us the rest of the loot. A bargain like that doesn't happen every day...'

Jake rolled his eyes at the refugee's envious expression. As if he had any chance of participating in such a dangerous expedition with his cowardice.

'And? What happened next?'

Remembering that he had a story to finish, the man pulled himself together and continued,

‘A new Rank 9 appeared outside the Shelter. Eight hours later exactly. The seven Evolvers were already gone, and a swarm of Oracle Drones were again sacrificed to repel them. Unexpected as it was, the Oracle System protocol operated as expected. A new Oracle Mission was issued and those same seven Evolvers returned a few minutes later to fix the issue. But it wasn’t enough...’

Jake was slowly beginning to see where the man was going with this.

‘A new Rank 9 appeared?’

The young woman couldn’t hold her nerve this time and cut off the scrawny man who was about to answer.

‘Yes, but only six hours after the second one. This time the seven Evolvers were still there and they killed it immediately. As they began to sense that something was wrong, they did not leave this time and decided to camp here. Not surprisingly, a fourth Rank 9 attacked four hours later, and then a fifth two hours after that...’

At this point, even Jake began to feel uncomfortable as he grasped the pattern. Carefully, he turned his head toward the Black Cube’s translucent walls, but he saw no sign of Digestors on the outside. Clearly, that problem had been solved as well.

‘By the twelfth Rank 9, a new Digestor was arriving almost every minute.’ The fifty-year-old man explained, gently patting the young woman’s back to comfort her as she was starting to hyperventilate disturbingly after arousing those far-from-resolved traumas.

‘The seven Evolvers were strong enough to kill one or two, but not in a matter of seconds. After the thirteenth Rank 9 Digestors arrived, it became unmanageable. These monsters kept coming faster and faster, to the point where they formed a veritable horde of Rank 9 Digestors. I’ve never seen anything so scary in my life, I swear...’

Jake could only imagine this apocalyptic vision. If he had sighted a horde of Rank 9 Digestors, he too would have fled without looking back. He was confident in his abilities, but he knew his limits. Confronting such a horde alone was just plain suicide.

But these Ranks 9 were nowhere in sight. So where the hell had they gone?

‘The Oracle Shelter has finally gone to Level 2 alert status.’ The man seemed to read his mind, because the answer came in the next few sentences. ‘With the Black Cube’s integrity and its inhabitants under threat, the volunteer-based Oracle Missions were no longer an effective model and the Oracle moved to more drastic measures. With the Oracle Guardians still unavailable, nearby High-Rankers were forcibly drafted and ordered to join the battle here to eliminate the threat of this horde.

‘It was an impressive sight. Thousands of overpowered Evolvers shooting out of the top of the Transportation Tower like a swarm of hornets. It was as if an army of heavenly angels had descended from the sky to purge the earth of its sins... The horde was defeated after three days of fierce fighting. 90% of the Oracle Drones in the Shelter were destroyed, but the Black Cube remained undamaged. The result may seem satisfactory, but half of the High-Rankers who participated in this conscription died. On the end three Rank 10 and one Rank 11 Digestors appeared and they decimated those hitherto unstoppable Evolvers like common insects.’

‘But you still want to get out of here? Why?’ Jake asked again, but this time with a much more stern countenance. Somehow he knew he wasn’t going to like the answer.

Faced with the stranger's cold, inquisitive look, the refugee didn't dare prolong the suspense any further. He blurted it all out in one breath.

'It was only a diversion. This Oracle Shelter is at the border separating the habitable zone from a hostile to life region. A few hundred kilometers to the west, several force fields and other advanced technologies isolate us from the atmosphere of what was surely once a gas planet. The Digestors came from that place. Because life is impossible down there, no one travels there to cut down on their numbers and their population grows exponentially.

'Their attacks were only meant to draw our attention away from their real objective. Whatever their objective was, they succeeded. The attacks may have stopped, but the Digestors in the vicinity of the Shelter have been growing in numbers and levels at a rapid rate ever since. The vegetation has begun to die and our Oracle Devices have ceased to function properly outside the Black Cube for over a thousand miles.'

'Is the cause of these changes known?' Jake didn't quite understand the purpose of these Digestors. Their strategic sense surprised him, but they were obviously capable of overwhelming the Oracle Shelter with their forces if they so chose.

The refugee took a deep breath to steady himself and then revealed in a chilling tone,

'Before we left, the High-Rankers warned us that all these signs marked the advent of a Dungeon Digestor and that it would mean the end of this Shelter.'