

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 52 – Predators

When Amy finally calmed down, the group was able to get down to business. The few cattle that had not fled before their arrival at the farm had been startled by the smell of blood and had rushed out of the enclosure towards the forest.

Their slaughter episode ended there, since a panicked ox could prove fatally dangerous if driven into a corner

. The session had also been quite demanding, both emotionally and physically. Will and Amy were exhausted.

Amy in particular had not been a great sportswoman in the past, and her typically feminine build and musculature had made her regret her lack of drive for physical exertion.

The saber forged by Jake was too heavy for her and without her new Frenzy skill, which increased her strength and put her in a state of ecstatic trance, she would never have been able to do so.

Nevertheless, this feat had not come without a price. She was covered in soreness, her bones and joints cracking alarmingly with every movement. Her muscles were also abnormally congested and painful.

Will was not to be outdone. Like any self-respecting businessman, he practiced a physical activity known as maintenance, simply to keep his body weight fit and healthy.

His tall stature and decent cardio had kept him going until then, but he was very clear about his chances of survival in the face of another encounter with one of these monsters. His wounded lung was throbbing with every breath he took.

Between the intensive morning walk and the intense effort to eliminate these poor animals, they had no juice left to last the rest of the day. Digestor's blood could indeed speed up their recovery, but it did not solve the problem of their lack of stamina. Besides, their supply wasn't infinite, and Jake preferred to keep it for emergencies.

All in all, Jake, Amy and Will had collected about 16 Aether points each, which was not insignificant. Combined, Jake now had 40 pure Aether points ready to be spent.

Seeing how tired they were, especially Amy, and considering that they still had a long way to go, he succinctly advised them to improve their Constitution as a priority.

Although investing their points in Strength and Agility seemed like a good choice, it did not serve Jake's purposes. Indeed, they might be stronger and more responsive in combat situations, but their mobility would be reduced in the long run due to exhaustion and physical injuries such as sprains and tendonitis.

Nevertheless, improving Strength was necessary, as it indirectly increased the ease with which they would perform physical exertion.

For example, a person capable of doing only one pull-up, would not do much more even if he tripled his stamina. Comparatively, a strength gain between 20 and 35% could make it possible to achieve 7 or 8. In essence, being stronger at the same weight would make them feel lighter and therefore force less.

Amy, who had her Frenzy skill almost doubling her Strength and Perception Aether, had such a sore body that she gladly listened to his advice and increased her Aether Constitution by 3 points. As for the remaining 4 points, she added 1 point to Agility Aether and 2 to Strength.

Will, who was still convalescing, had little choice. He invested 3 points in Constitution and the remaining 4 points in Strength. He immediately felt his breathing calm down and become less painful.

Meanwhile, Jake decided to align his Strength and Constitution Aether with the Agility Aether, raising them both from 13 to 16 points. The remaining points would be used on a case-by-case basis.

The Constitution Aether had that miraculous quality that even a well-trained body could not attain. It was not necessary to eat or drink more or better to maintain this gain in endurance and stamina.

The best of the maratonians, who would have displayed a Stamina (Constitution's subattribute) of at least 30 on his Body Status would collapse like everyone else after a long race if he didn't consume drinks rich in sugars and electrolytes. The stamina was real, but fully dependent on his fuel source.

The Aether, for the moment, cheated the laws of physics, since this endurance didn't require any particular change. By eating and drinking just the same, the Maratonian would run farther and faster. Put that way, the Aether was indeed a clean source of energy.

After a few sips of Digestor blood each, the group set off again under Jake's leadership, leaving behind a devastated farmhouse and a bloody scene straight out of a nightmare.

After walking only two kilometres from the farm to the Red Cube, they found signs of escaped pigs. A kilometre further on, they found the body of one of them.

The body was still warm, and hoof tracks split all around indicated that the rest, or at least part of the herd of liberated pigs accompanied it. Half the neck had been torn off and the hindquarters eaten off.

This could have been the work of a Digestor, but it could also have been due to an unwelcome encounter with another predator. A predator from Earth would probably

have devoured the entire carcass or taken the rest of the carcass with it, unless it had been prevented from doing so.

This was not at all reassuring, considering how few Earth carnivores were capable of tearing off half the padded neck of an adult pig with their jaws. A large lion, a tiger, a bear, maybe a crocodile. There may have been others counting aliens, but none of those cited had to blush when confronted with a Digestor lvl1.

Only those larger than them in size and capable of changing the shape of their extremities would trigger a flight instinct in these territorial animals. And again, nothing could be less certain. The largest bears could weigh nearly a ton and stand more than three meters tall, a size that was impressive even for these monsters.

The real danger was if apex carnivores of their planet had arrived before them and therefore evolved prematurely. Considering how fast Crunch was growing, a lion or a tiger would not be good news.

These predators were also gaining Aether by consuming their prey. It wouldn't be long before the most dangerous among them would become an even more terrible threat than the Digestors, if they became more intelligent.

Thank God they didn't have to worry about harmful insects. Mosquitoes, for example, had a very short life expectancy. A little extra Aether wouldn't give them time to become biological disasters. Especially since these insects didn't have an Oracle device in principle.

[They don't, but their Aetheric Code was still modified when they were transported on B842. If by chance some of these bugs suck the blood of a high-ranking Digestor, they can evolve quite fast.] Xi interrupted him, shattering his illusions with her customary lack of mercy.

"Oh great... Worse and worse..." Jake sighed, taciturn again.

"What's the matter?" Amy worried, as she saw his change in expression.

"Nothing... At least I hope so."

Anyway, it was to be hoped that this predator was cowardly or simply too lazy or sated to carry away the remains of his prey. In any case, the Aether had been consumed.

Jake decided to follow the hoof prints of the herd, believing it to be a source of Aether and food easily earned. If Digestors were hunting them as well, they would at least have the help of the surviving pigs as a diversion.

Moreover, they were going in the same direction as they were. Maybe these pigs were going to the Red Cube for their First Ordeal as well.

The pigs were moving much faster than they thought. Jake had accelerated the pace of the group, taking advantage of their improved physique and adapted outfits to push them further.

Nothing fabulous, a little jog of 9 km / h. For four hours. Not a single stop except to eat an occasional slice of jerky and take a sip or two of Digestor blood to invigorate Will and Amy.

Jake hadn't felt hungry or thirsty once, despite traveling almost forty kilometers. Not even a world champion on Earth could have done much better.

Even though Jake was exceptional among humans, he should have eaten or drank like Amy and Will, but he didn't. Halfway through the race he forced himself to snack on a piece of meat, but without pleasure. The magical effect of the Aether of Constitution was thus confirmed.
