

# The Oracle Paths

## Volume 2: The First Ordeal

### Chapter 53 – The Knight and the Bear

At sunset, the tracks of the pigs became more difficult to follow, despite the large number of hoof prints. Nevertheless, the signs of other creatures' passage became more apparent, especially those of the Digestors.

One of them was larger than the ones Jake had faced. Very different footprints preceded the herd. The size of the footprints looked like a bear's, and a big one to make matters worse.

The big mystery was that the pigs were following in his footsteps, covering his tracks. The carnivorous mammal being their predator, the pigs should have taken a different direction instead of following it.

The conclusion to draw was that it was running away from the same thing. And since no pig carcass had been found after that, not even blood, it meant that the Digestors were not interested in them.

"Why would they ignore an easy prey? Aether?" Jake wondered frowning as he analyzed a sequence of mixed footprints, which seemed to indicate that the Digestors were moving through the herd of pigs without taking action.

'They're hunting a bear.' He concluded mentally.

"From now on, nobody talks anymore." Jake ordered in a commanding tone. "In general, imitate my movements. If any of you scream or endanger us, I'll knock you out myself. Questions?"

"No questions..." Amy and Will mumbled, their throats tight and dripping with sweat.

"Then let's get going."

A caimquozu ifouz, ovuw guefr om vufz ovmlu dfqmpl lvzaii hfhciul md qaldmzopru. Fzmq oaqu om oaqu, f vmfzlu zmfz frljuzut, dmiimjut gw ovu zuloiull lypufil md ovu nael.

Two kilometers later, the cries were getting closer and closer and more roars were added to the first one. Five kilometers further on, they came upon a lonely, living pig.

The pig had broken its leg during its desperate escape and seemed to be at the end of its rope. Jake slaughtered it mercilessly and absorbed its Aether.

Forsaking the dead pig, he noticed a trail of blood associated with the paw prints of what appeared to be a bear. A debilitating wound, considering the amount of blood loss. The predator was living out its last moments and wouldn't get very far. If it moved quickly, it had a chance to stop the Digestors' pack from feasting on its corpse.

"We're speeding up." Jake warned, starting to run at twice the speed he was running at before.

Will and Amy looked at each other without saying a word, sighed, and then began to run behind him. Over the next three kilometers, they discovered more and more blood, and more and more isolated pigs. Some dead from fatigue, others mortally wounded by a fall, and a few rare lacerated but alive.

In any case, the Aether filaments had not been harvested and the group picked them up with great joy. Nevertheless, their passionate harvest had to stop abruptly, or else they too would be harvested in atrocious suffering.

As the trees in the forest became more and more scattered, and the wild grasses were replaced by an eccentric translucent cyan sand, the group arrived at the foot of a slope a few meters high.

"GROOOAAAARR!!"

A roar out of all proportion to anything they'd heard before, paralyzed them with terror. The trees were vibrating, the earth was shaking. Their violated eardrums began to bleed, a tinnitus sound adding to the surrounding cacophony.

Pfrahcut nael juzu zprrare omjftzl ovuq, ouzzadaut md jvfo ovuw vft bplo urhmprouzut. Jfcu arouzhunout jaov val qfhvuou fii ovu nael ovfo hzmllut val giftu, tulnaou val lopnmz.

Considering the urgency, he sucked up the Aether without concern for Amy and Will and rushed up the hill. What he saw there forever changed his view of the world, of which he was but an insignificant pawn.

A few meters away, lying at his feet, the remains of a Kodiak bear, among the largest he had ever seen in a photo. Guted from side to side, it had bled to death up to here, not without taking several Digestors in death with it, as attested by the silvery blood-covered corpses.

A few dozen meters further on, a similar bear emitted squeaks of agony, its front paws severed and a gaping wound in its lower abdomen revealing its intestines. It was doomed. But the real horror scene was two hundred meters away, at the edge of the forest.

A Digester more massive than anything Jake had ever seen before. Almost four meters at the withers, seven meters standing.

The chitin on the hind legs now extended to the rest of the body, forming a surprisingly harmonious armor. A piece of chitin covered the monster's skull, forming a helmet very similar to the visored helmets of knights, except that here the visor struggled to hide the pulsating white light from the creature's three silvery eyes.

The arms had split into a pair of sharp metal wings more than ten metres wide, while the original arms had taken the form of a huge round shield and a blade as long as the creature.

The metal tail resembled that of a mouse, but was now as long and thick as a boa and dragged along the ground behind the monster. From which alien species this Digester was inspired to take this shape, Jake had no idea.

In front of this abyssal creature was a titanic and completely rabid Kodiak bear.

The bears lying in front of Jake, he understood, were her children, and he could have sworn that tears were streaming from the predatory mother's brown eyes. Such an emotion of sadness and anger, the giant bear seemed almost human.

If the cubs were the size of a large adult bear, was it necessary to give the mother's measurements? Here they come anyway: Six meters at the withers, eleven meters long, ten tons at the very least.

A singularly shiny brown fur, as if they were thin steel blades rather than hair. Sharp black claws half a metre long and fangs in the same vein. With each roar, it spat out enough to fill a small bathtub.

What did Jake do when he saw a scene like that out of a fantasy book? Nothing glorious. He threw himself to the ground on the other side of the field.

The Aether of the Bear and the dead Digestors hadn't been picked up, but he wasn't one of those who risked his life for a lost cause, oh no. The huge Digestor wasn't alone. Other monsters, as big as those he had fought, were assisting it.

Two other frightened cubs were hiding in their mother's paws, but foolish would be the one to underestimate them. After all, one of them had torn the neck of a full-grown pig out of a mouthful anyway. Goddamn it, how long had those bears been on this planet?!

For a brief moment, hesitation almost made him lose his mind, but the gaze of a group of Digestors in his direction acted as a perfect cold shower. Although he had gained confidence since his first fights, he knew his limits.

To shoot one of these things down, neither his gun nor his machete was cut out for the role. It would require explosives or a much more powerful firearm than he had at his disposal. He always had his assault rifle warm in his pack, but that would not change anything.

Just as he was about to head back down the slope, the status quo was broken when a Digestor sneaked between the mother bear's hind legs to bite the tendons of one of the cubs.

A roar of rage covered the victim's squeak of suffering and a second later, the guilty Digestor, a creature much larger than those he had defeated, was torn into four pieces by a claw of extreme violence. The torso, chitinous legs and head flew off in three different directions, while the monster's hooves remained planted on the ground.

When Jake saw this, he turned pale. Until now, he thought that a mammal this size would be slow, like the dinosaurs of old. He was wrong. That was without counting on the Aether.

The move was so fast, the air whistled during the attack, projecting a gust of wind that was perceptible from his hiding place. He could barely keep up with his eyes. The Digestor wannabe knight uttered a shrill, screeching

cackling sound that rattled his eardrums in response to the bear's display of strength.

A second later, the two enraged titans charged towards each other.

Jake didn't stay to witness the fight of the century. He leapt down the slope, only to be caught up by a sound wave similar to two shells exploding against each other.

Amy and Will, who hadn't moved since his last instruction, were so pale-looking and immobile that he wondered if they had died forgetting to breathe. There was no time to coddle them.

"Let's get the fuck out of here!" Their improvised leader shouted out, sprinting around the battlefield without turning back.

"Don't stop if you want to live."