

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 54 – The Cyan Desert

Watching such a nervous Jake run away without turning around, Amy and Will's icy blood started boiling with adrenaline. If this muscle-bound, badly combed barbarian, who was cutting the Digestors with a smile on his face, was scared, it meant that they absolutely didn't want to find out what was lurking at the top of the hill.

The trio ran with all their might, Jake continuing to outrun them without a glance. After fifteen minutes he took a sharp turn and headed back to the Red Cube.

A few minutes later, he reached the edge of the forest again, to enter without transition a desert of cyan and translucent grains of sand, the same ones they had previously discovered as they approached the limits of the deciduous forest.

The desert was desperately arid, not conducive to the development of life. No trees, grasses or cacti. No moisture or watering holes. Not even dunes or mounds to vary the landscape.

The desert was uniformly flat and blue as far as the eye could see. From a distance, it looked like a calm sea, but it wasn't. An alien desert, in short. There was no such place on Earth.

Under other circumstances, Jake would never have ventured into this dead end of sand, and would have searched for an alternative, even if it meant wasting time. Unfortunately, they didn't have that luxury.

The deafening screams and shocks of the two giant monsters slyly reminded them that they weren't out of the woods yet and that it would only take a few minutes for the winner to find them by tracking their scent.

He looked one last time in the direction of the forest, drew a deep breath, and then took a determined step towards the unknown land.

Will and Amy stared at each other hesitantly, and then with the motivational help of a shrill, louder cackling sound than the previous ones, set off in the shadow of the taciturn man to whom they owed their lives.

Mufjrjvau, frmovuz ezmpn md lpzSaSmzl juzu lozpeeiare om ftfno om oval ruj jnzit. Tvu Pifwgmw vuit mr oaevoiw om val Cmio jaov mriw dasu gpiiul iudo.

On their way back to the snowy hill, they had bumped into another group of Digestors. Miraculously, it wasn't the same ones from the hypermarket that had ravaged their group, but creatures barely bigger than a big cat.

They had recognizable batrachian gray skin and shared a passion for the shrill cackles of their older brothers. These monsters were six-legged, with the same metal scythes acting as forelegs.

Nevertheless, the similarity with their evolved version ended there. While their scythes were still as sharp as ever, these monsters moved much more awkwardly. They were slower, weaker and much less durable.

What a relief, when one bullet had been enough to bring them down. The Playboy had then fired two more shots before he realized there were too many of these vermin.

Despite the vulnerability of these new opponents, they had still opted to flee, even though they knew they wouldn't often have such good opportunities to harvest Aether. It was not easy to change one's cowardly nature.

During their escapade, the child's 40-year-old mother had been bitten in the hock by a Digestor that was faster than its fellow brethren.

Loana, one of the groupies, had also startled everyone when she screamed in pain behind them. Turning around, Kyle had caught a glimpse of the jaw of one of the monsters firmly hooked to her left hand as she shook it vigorously.

Before anyone could come to her aid, the wretched beast had let go, not forgetting to take half of her fingers in the process. The pain had been so intense that she had barely managed to convince herself to continue running.

However, she had held on; a commendable performance for someone who had only been running and depending on others to survive until now.

Tvu Daeulomzl vft rmo hvflut ovuq om ovu omn md ovu vaii. Svmpit ao gu arduzzut ovfo ovulu hzufopzul hmpit rmo loftr ovu hmit ? Oz jfl ao zfovuz guhfplu oval fzuf jfl nzmouhout gw ovu Ozfhiu fl f efovuzare nifhu dmz rmsahul ifrtare mr nifruo B842 ?

There was no way to tell, and they didn't care.

The Playboy had only agreed to take a break after hurtling down the other side of the hill in the same direction the barbarian and the other two traitors had taken, despite the pleas of the middle-aged woman.

To her great surprise, the child had been surprisingly compliant, and Loana, who was missing the fingers of one hand, was perfectly silent, although her countenance was corpse-like.

The good news was that with their Oracle devices, they were not lost along the way. As long as their desire to catch up with the other trio was clear, the Oracle would show them a clear Path to follow.

Loana was pale, covered in sweat, exhibiting advanced signs of anemia. Indeed, they had been running at full speed for almost thirty minutes, leaving a gaping wound untreated.

This was without considering the fact that they hadn't eaten much since the morning of their arrival on B842, and spent most of their time walking or running for their lives.

After having bandaged their wounds, they set off again, this time towards the Red Cube, hoping to meet their much hoped-for savior again soon.

And there they were. After more than thirty-six hours without sleep, Providence had heard their prayers and a ruined farmhouse stood before them. A macabre scene unfolded before them.

Hundreds of dead livestock, their blood and guts stretching as far as the eye could see. Scavenging raven-like birds pecked at the eyes of the larger mammals.

Sqfii duiarul frt movuz zmturol duflout jvaiu aermzare ufhv movuz,
prhmrhuzrut fgmpo ovu gpXXare md diaul mz ovu lourhv md hfzzamr.

Despite their disgust, they were relieved. Their group was exhausted, with two wounded who needed to be disinfected.

Loana had a high fever and had slowed down the pace considerably over the last few kilometres. The only man still alive apart from Kyle and Kyle himself had supported her for the rest of the distance, the intense effort adding to their fatigue.

The child's mother was fine, but was primarily responsible for their slowness. Her injury was not that serious, but it was an inconvenience because of its location. The scabs reopened with the slightest movement, and this housewife had an extremely low tolerance for pain.

Her son in comparison was an example of resolution and perseverance. He had followed the group without complaining once.

Paradoxically, the weakest was one of the most resilient in the group, since children of this age had a lot of recess time at school, which they spent playing games that were demanding on the cardiovascular system, such as running, dodgeball, wolf play and other team sports.

The advent of augmented reality had also made video games a significant source of physical activity. Kyle was a great player himself, and maybe that's why he was doing so well, despite the fact that he had been burying his head in the sand for the past four months instead of preparing.

For the record, they had also been attacked once by a lone Rank 2 Digestor, which the Playboy had managed to shoot down by wasting several bullets, hence his three remaining rounds of ammunition.

For the time being, it was fair to say that they were lucky. If they hadn't been so miserable, he would almost have assumed that someone was taking out the monsters for them.

How could he have known that his reasoning was so close to the truth?

Id ovuw vft ozfsuiut mriw f duj vpertzut quouzl dpzovuz julo, ovuw jmpit vfsu talhmsuzut f hiufzare hmsuzut jaov ovu zuqfarl md Daeulomzl talluhout gw Jfcu firt val ezmpn.

Somehow, someone had really killed the monsters for them, even though it had never been their goal.

The Playboy had hastened to absorb what little Aether he could get. Sarah, the dominant blonde of the group, had still stolen two of his precious Aether strands.

The first, by snatching the loot of one of his Colt's victims before he could access it, the second by her own means. When the Digestors Level 1 went after them, one of them jumped at her, but unlike Loana, Sarah had the presence of mind to pick up a long stainless steel knife from the mall's kitchen counter.

The monster had come to impale itself against her blade, offering its Aether with a last gasp of regret.

The dialogue was becoming increasingly tense between them, considering the fact that they were both notoriously selfish when their lives were at stake. And they both knew they were cast in the same mould, hence their obvious mistrust.

If he pretended to forget his Colt on a piece of furniture, Sarah would have immediately grabbed it, even if it meant pointing the gun at Kyle to dissuade him from depriving her of it.

Meanwhile, they had laid Loana on the living room sofa after making sure the house was unoccupied. Sophie, Sarah, Kyle and the other middle-aged man set out to find something to disinfect and bandage the wounds of the two injured ones.

They soon became disenchanted.

The farm had already been searched from top to bottom, and everything that could be of use had been looted. However, when they came down with nothing but a gloomy look on their faces, they discovered a large garbage bag full of supplies and utilities, with a message hastily written on a crumpled piece of paper:

"Sorry to the owners, we took the initiative to help ourselves. We've left enough to last a while in case you come back or for other passing survivors."

That was Amy's handwriting.

