

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 67 - Who is the hunter? Who is the Prey?

‘Boss, what the hell is Lamine doing?’ A man with an island accent complained. ‘He should have been back long ago.’

‘Knowing him, he must be enjoying himself like a little fool. It’s been a long time since he’s had such a good time.’ Another lower male voice with an accent that Jake thought was African replied.

BANG! Tatata! BANG!

‘He’s having fun, he’s having fun, but his shots are getting closer and closer and our ammunition isn’t infinite.’ A third voice intervened after a short silence.

‘Indeed...’ The second voice grumbled in response. ‘He was simply to attack the humans without faction and neutralize any possible threats. Most of our men have already returned with their spoils. His tardiness worries me.’

Tatatata!

Taking advantage of another round of fire, Jake slashed the canvas of the pavilion to get a visual feedback of the situation inside.

The boss, the second voice, was a 1.9m tall, physically fit, black man close to 40 years of age. His frizzy hair was shaved very short, his face and forearms were covered with cigarette burns, a sign of abuse and mistreatment in his youth. He wore old military clothes

salvaged from the army of some African dictatorship. Medals and other pins covered his uniform.

Like Jake, he had a machete in his belt and a standard military knife and a revolver. A rifle without accessories was slung across his shoulder, perhaps a Kalashnikov or an AK47. Dated weapons.

His cold bird of prey gaze and his aquiline nose gave him a severity reflecting how ruthless he must surely be with his enemies. This man had a history, but also many vices. When he saw him, Jake knew instantly that he would be a tough opponent.

Alongside two other men, an African man in a similar uniform and a white man with a shaved head and wearing sunglasses at night were displaying serious expressions. Both were also equipped with the same paraphernalia and had the confidence and posture of experienced soldiers.

‘By the way, what’s the deal with that chick you brought me?’ The man who had to be the leader changed the subject.

Following his gaze, Jake noticed Amy’s body, also naked and unconscious. Seriously, what was wrong with these guys stripping every woman they captured? From the beginning of the kidnapping until now, it must have been a total of maybe 20 minutes.

‘Well, apparently, when Saya kicked the kid, she went crazy and knocked him out with a good jab.’ The bald guy with the sunglasses chuckled back. ‘It was so unexpected, we had to bludgeon her down with a club. She’s gonna be out cold for quite a while.’

‘Oh... Whacking Saya in one fell swoop with her petite frame, that’s pretty damn impressive. Let’s check her Aether level.’ The other soldier commented, suddenly excited. ‘Boss, I don’t have the Aether scanner, so I’ll let you do the honors.’

‘All right, let me do it.’

That freaked Jake out. Checking Aether levels by scanning a target was possible?! Without the person’s consent? Without touching the bracelets? If it was, it was dangerous for him. If he was spotted, forget the surprise effect and he would be machine-gunned by three professional mercenaries.

His concern was confirmed, but he relaxed again soon after. To activate his scanner, their leader had to get close to Amy, less than a meter from her body. If the range was that limited, he had nothing to worry about.

‘Mmm, it’s done. Average Aether level 11pts, highest stats 13pts, lowest 10pts.’ Their leader announced with a frown, visibly confused.

‘Even if her strength was her highest stats, that shouldn’t be enough to disable Saya with a single jab. It would take a perfect blow to the temple or whiplash to do that. I doubt she had that level of skill. The report indicated that she was punching and kicking any way she could, without any special skills. Clearly an amateur.’

Their leader remained silent for a few seconds, pensively scratching his goatee.

‘In this case, there’s only one explanation.’ Their leader finally concluded with a definite tone. ‘She’s got an Aether Skill like Lamine.’

The two right-hand men were both shocked and envious.

‘Lamine was already an incredible marksman before we arrived on this goddamn planet.’ The chief refreshed their memories. ‘But since he awakened his Perfect Sight skill, he has become unfathomable.’

‘Even I would have a hard time standing up to him. As long as he has his eyes and a sniper rifle, he’s invincible...‘

Suddenly, a shapeless mass crashed against the canvas of the pavilion before rolling indoors as best it could. This one turned out to be a man in a pitiful state with short black hair and mixed skin, in his mid-thirties, wearing a military uniform similar to the other three.

A huge sniper rifle, maybe a Barrett, was strapped across his shoulder, while he held in each hand an automatic machine gun. The man was dripping with sweat and running out of bullets, his long beard was pissed off and the turban that was supposed to be wrapped around the top of his skull was completely undone.

This man was Lamine the marksman. The same man who took out Jake, Will and the Playboy without breaking a sweat. He had no apparent wounds, but he appeared to be at the end of his life, without the composure normally expected of a battlefield veteran.

‘Lamine?! What the hell happened to you?!‘ The three mercenaries shouted, helping him up in a hurry.

Looking haggardly, the sniper tried in vain to come to his senses after his aerobatics and rough landing. Shaking his head and slapping himself to wake up, he finally remembered the mess they were in.

‘Yerode, we’ve got to get out of here now, or we’re all dead. We should never have made a move tonight.‘

When Lamine spoke, he had a slight accent that Jake didn’t recognize, but the tremor in his voice, thinner than usual, indicated how serious the threat was. His leader, the one called Yerode, had

absolute confidence in his best shooter and made the decision immediately.

‘Let’s get out of here. Get what you can.’ He gave the order in a manner that would not tolerate any refusal.

‘What about the rest of our men?’ The bald white man asked.

‘We’ll leave them behind as a diversion.’ Yerode decided with a grim face that made their blood run cold.

Yerode had many faults, but if he was still alive today, it was mainly because he always put his own survival above all else. Within seconds, the quartet picked up their pre-prepared backpacks before rushing out the door.

Unfortunately, luck was not on their side. The bald man in sunglasses who led the way barely managed to put one foot out before being sent flying in the opposite direction at the speed of a rifle bullet through the pavilion canvas.

‘Holy shit!’ Jake and the three mercenaries watched the scene, frozen in terror. Even in front of the Giant Bear and the Digestor Knight, he hadn’t felt death so close.

Showing their experience as veterans, the still living trio quickly came to their senses, raining a cloud of bullets down on the newcomer at the entrance to the pavilion. The problem was that in front of them, there was nothing?

The bullets ricocheted off an intangible form, a sign that their bullets were hitting the mark, but no roar of pain or spurt of blood told them that their shots were working.

‘Keep firing backwards. We’ll escape through the hole Theo opened for us against his will, God bless his soul.’ Their leader bellowed, trying to cover the sound of the bullets with his voice.

Once inside the pavilion and under the fire of the still lit smartphone flash, the enemy revealed itself to them. It was a humanoid creature more than two meters tall, massively muscular with a membranous obsidian skin. It seemed to be equipped with a helmet shaped like the head of some indescribable monster.

Underneath, a huge gaping mouth with thousands of teeth like a lamprey. No eyes but thousands of luminescent dendrites as hair from a few centimetres to several metres long, smelling and perceiving the environment around it, as if each one had a life of its own.

An armor in an unknown metal protected the vital parts of the creature, including a breastplate, armguards, leggings and shoulder pads. The creature held a sort of black blade that seemed to grow from an accessory above its wrist.

Tvu turtzaoul fhoare fl vfaz juzu tudiuhoare ovu gpiiuol rmr lomn. Adouz f lvmzo oaqu, ovu hzufopzu luuqut om ftno om ovu ruj ursazmrquro. Tvu turtzaoul jzfnnut fzmprt aol gmtw frt iacu f nuzduho hvfquiumr, ovu fiaur guhfqu arsalagiu fefar, giurtare arom ovu lhuruzw.

The newcomer, satisfied, emitted an ultrasonic roar that shattered his eardrums. Then, as if provoked, it charged at more than a hundred kilometers an hour towards the three mercenaries.

‘Oh, God, forgive...’

The other African mercenary didn’t even have time to say his last prayers as the creature rammed him with all its weight, the

dendrites riddling him with thousands of holes in an instant before tearing him to pieces.

Yerode and Lamine had not once looked back, taking advantage of their accumulation of Aether to gain as much distance as possible. The alien roared again before leaping in pursuit. Amy's unconscious body had been completely ignored from start to finish.

As for Jake, like the Playboy earlier, he was playing dead...