

The Oracle Paths

Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

Chapter 151 - Welcome to the Oracle city

‘Tim? They made you eat soup all through your Ordeal?’ Jake asked not without surprise.

‘Uh, something like that...’ The teenager responded with an embarrassed laugh as he scratched his head, his unstable voice just beginning to break.

In any case, it was neither the right time nor the right place to talk. The cawing of the Digestors could still be heard and all kinds of people, animals and aliens were still fleeing in their direction, the agitation and panic making them all the more dangerous.

The sooner they left the Cyan Desert, the better they would feel. Once they were in a safe place — if such a place existed on this damn planet outside the Oracle cities — they would have plenty of time to tell each other about their adventures and make up for lost time.

‘Let’s get out of here, we’ll talk later.’ Jake cut the chat short before resuming his run at a pace everyone could keep up with.

Upon realizing that Will and Tim could follow his initial rhythm, he increased his original pace until he reached a speed where Will and Tim could still keep up but were unable to speak more than a few words without running out of breath.

Shockingly, Will lagged slightly behind Tim. The child probably had lower Aether stats than they did, but his physical condition was

excellent. Unlike the former businessman, Tim's Ordeal seemed to have included a good proportion of physical activity.

Jake wondered what rewards Will had received, since in his eyes the Oracle would never give an Ordeal that was useless. Even if someone was physically handicapped or unable to learn to fight, the Ordeal would eventually be painful and challenging enough to increase their survivability. If the Ordeal itself had nothing to do with survival, the Ordeal's end reward would have to make up for some of this deficit.

In any case, the trotting speed of the group was higher than that of the best marathon runner. Jake, Sarah and Kyle could probably keep up this pace indefinitely, their hearts beating only a few times a minute.

In less than two hours, the group finally left the salt desert. Just as they had entered, but in reverse, the salt sand gradually became scarcer, revealing vegetation reminiscent of a savannah.

The only difference was that the tall grasses and tree leaves wavered between blueberry blue and magenta. The trunks of the few shrubs in their field of vision were pale green and had a smooth, moist texture like that of a young shoot. However, to the touch the texture was clearly that of the bark of an adult deciduous tree.

The earth was dark blue and relatively dry, while the sky had turned cloudy in an instant, with red micro-lightning scattered across the cumulonimbus clouds clearly reminding them that this environment had nothing to do with the Earth.

In fact, even with his Constitution and high Vitality, Jake had a slight respiratory discomfort and his head was spinning a little, suggesting to him that the atmosphere was somewhat different. Oxygen levels

seemed to be poorer, while the slight feeling of daze and euphoria betrayed the presence of other molecules in the atmosphere, such as nitrous oxide or something with similar effects.

He could have used the Scan of his bracelet to find out for sure, but it cost Aether, and as long as the Path prioritizing his survival didn't make him take a detour, he had nothing to fear. Before the Ordeal, it could have been different.

Sarah, Kyle and Crunch had no particular problem breathing this air, even though his cat sneezed several times trying to sniff the alien herbs a little too closely. He tried to chew on one of them thinking he had found a good alternative to his catnip, but he immediately spat it out in a hissing motion as if he had just met his nemesis.

The cat then peed on it for revenge before waddling behind the group again, determined not to touch anything more. The cat's little game made them laugh for a short while, relaxing the atmosphere.

Will and Tim could breathe the air harmlessly, but their running pace had slowed, a sign that their bodies weren't fully able to withstand such a drop in oxygen levels.

Jake felt that the Oracle city couldn't be far away. Aslael had assured them at the time that an Oracle city was always within two hundred kilometers of their position anywhere on the planet.

Considering the snowy hill where they had met the Instructor, the map from his Oracle device indicated that they had traveled almost 150 kilometers just to reach the Red Cube.

The Red Cube was to the northeast of the hill from the cardinal points he had arbitrarily defined, while the nearest Oracle city was east of the Cube. After two hours of jogging at more than 20 km/h, they couldn't have been very far.

Jake thought that since then, they should have at least spotted the city walls or at least the tops of a few buildings. Even without that, signs of passage such as overturned earth or just typical noises of human, animal or alien activity should have started to appear.

Paradoxically, there was none of that. After sinking a few more kilometers into the tall grass of another exoplanet, Jake finally discovered the signs of activity he was looking for.

The tall grass had been cut or trampled in some places, proving that several groups of individuals had been there before them recently. Considering that Cho Min-Ho's faction was also on his way to the nearest Oracle city, these could be their tracks. Unfortunately, Jake wasn't an expert in tracking and couldn't confirm anything.

Over the next few kilometers, the grasses grew higher and higher, overtaking them in height, whilst ugly brambles began to stand in their way. The groups of humans or aliens that had passed through before them had already made their way up the path with claws or blades, and Jake and his group took advantage of this by going directly along these pre-formed paths.

After a while, a ravine halted their progress. A huge gulf several hundred meters long cut the route, but to their dismay, their Shadow Guide was urging them to jump. It threw itself into the ravine, vanishing after a few meters.

Jake peered over the precipice, the depth of which was impossible to determine, and threw a pebble picked up at the edge of it. Even with his superhuman hearing, he didn't hear any impact, even after several minutes, which was rather strange.

With the recent misadventures of his first Ordeal, Jake was less inclined to trust the Paths offered by the Oracle System. The

proposed Path conflicted with what his senses were telling him and therefore if it was a trap created by a Digestor or a Super-high ranked Player it would be like kicking himself.

‘Wait for me here. I’ll give you a signal if it’s okay.’ Jake decisively ordered the rest of the group to wait while he checked to see if the proposed Path was safe.

Dropping off his backpack, he rummaged around inside looking for a rope, then tied himself to one end of it. He then asked Kyle and Sarah to hold the other end. With their current strength, supporting Jake’s weight wasn’t particularly difficult. In fact, he was more concerned about the rope.

What was certain was that he had no intention of falling. It was just a last precaution in case he slipped or made a mistake.

Clutching onto the edge of the cliff, Jake began to scale down the cliff. With a few good kicks, he broke the rock to create a notch where his hand could grip. He then let himself slide down until his hand reached the nick. Seeing that the rock indentation was holding, he gained confidence and repeated the process, quickly sliding down the few meters where the Shadow Guide disappeared.

As he felt around the void with his foot, he felt no resistance and decided to continue his descent. As he passed the level where the Shadow Guide disappeared his view changed and a huge Black Cube appeared under his feet, completely blocking the ravine. When his boots made contact with it and disappeared inside, a System notification popped in his mind.

[Black Cube leading to an Oracle City detected. Would you like to pay 1 Aether point to enter?]

Hallelujah, they had finally found a safe place. At least the entrance ticket wasn't too expensive. The cost of living inside was yet to be discovered.

Ignoring the notification, he climbed back up the cliff in seconds with an ease that would have made Spiderman uncomfortable. Seeing him suddenly reappear before their eyes, the group was startled, but they quickly pulled themselves together.

‘ So ?‘ Will asked with some trepidation. He didn't like the idea of jumping into the void.

‘We've reached our destination. Welcome to the Oracle city.’ Jake said with a smile.