

# The Oracle Paths

## Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

### Chapter 153 - The rules' loopholes

'Xi, do you understand the universal language of the Mirror Universe?' Jake tried his luck, although he was not very optimistic.

[Mmmm... I can read the light engravings on the buildings in the distance, but if I try to write or speak in this language, it's a black hole.] Xi sighed after trying for a few seconds.

[I think my memories are still locked. The real Xi didn't speak English originally, so it's probably one of the aspects of my memory that the Oracle System has tampered.]

'Never mind, we tried.' Jake consoled her as best he could when he noticed the AI's distress. 'It's just one more language to learn. I'm a genius now, it shouldn't be that hard.'

'Who are you talking to, Jake?' Sarah, who was standing next to him, suddenly asked him.

Upon hearing her question, he realized he'd been talking out loud without realizing it. He then remembered that his companions also had an AI like his with their own personalities. He wondered if all Oracle AIs were similar or if Xi was special.

'My Oracle AI. I was checking to see if she could act as a translator, but she can't.' Jake replied succinctly.

Sarah's eyes opened slightly out of surprise. So did Will, who was following the conversation beside them.

‘She? Your Oracle AI is a woman?’ Will exclaimed with an envious look. ‘Mine has the voice of an absolutely unbearable auto-tune robot. His original body was an android.’

‘What?! Original body?’ Kyle, who had decided to ignore the drone for good, joined the conversation.

‘Don’t you ever talk to your AI?’ Sarah taunted him with a raised, annoyed eyebrow.

‘Our AIs are the duplicate consciousnesses of real individuals who have existed or still exist in the Mirror Universe. I thought you already knew that by now...’

Kyle was speechless at the revelation, his jaw so open it could drop at any moment. A dentist would have appreciated attending to a patient like that.

‘Does this mean I have a chance to meet Veya someday? Awesome!’

Seeing his exuberance, the rest of the group facepalmed themselves, deciding to pretend they didn’t know him while Jake walked straight to the city. The ground was extremely sleek and of the same carbon-grey colour as the mysterious buildings they were heading towards. It looked like a huge slab with a few legos added on top.

In the end Tim was by far the quietest, just following him closely. His mother’s death, which for them was already a few months old, seemed like ancient history to him. He did not behave at all like a five year old child who would have grown up in a hurry. His maturity was consistent with that of a teenager his age.

This confirmed two things: His Ordeal had lasted a few years, and the world he had been sent to was different from his own. Otherwise,

by the time Jake had met the Digestors, he would have been sent back along with them. Clearly, his Ordeal had not been affected by his ill-fated encounter.

As they were making steady progress, the group passed all sorts of makeshift camps. The poverty and fatigue of most of the survivors was apparent. In the absence of toilets as well as sewage and garbage disposal routes, the smell of excrement, urine and sweat was ever-present. With its high Perception, it was a real torment.

Many of the refugees were lethargic, just sleeping or sitting, but others were more vigorous, using every means available to relieve their stress. Whether animals, humans or aliens, cries of fornication, more or less ecstatic or consensual, could be heard everywhere.

Od hmpzlu, vu tat rmo nzuourt om gu fgiu om arouznzuo ovu qufrare md ovu rmalul uqaoout gw prcrmjr lnuhaul frt usur iull om crmj fii ovu qmtul md zunzmtphoamr ukaloare ar ovu Mazzmz Urasuzlu frt jvuovuz ovuw juzu f lmpzhu md n'èàlpzè mz rmo.

Jake had not missed the loopholes in the Oracle city's rules of conduct. It was forbidden to steal, injure or kill, but there were plenty of other ways to harm someone without breaking those rules and some people had already figured that out.

For example, it was possible to \*\*\*\*, manipulate or extort someone without causing physical injury by using aphrodisiacs, sleeping pills, or simply threatening, blackmailing or coercion. The level of flexibility of the rules remained to be determined, but if there were only Ais like this drone to ensure their proper enforcement, he was not very hopeful.

It was clear that the aliens, animals and humans camped in droves around the various Cubes and structures had not yet participated in their first Ordeal. In addition to being exhausted, their faces were

often terrified and haggard as if their minds were too narrow to handle so much change in such a short time.

A Player, even a bad one who failed his Ordeal, was comparatively more stable. Because the Ordeal had lasted a long time, they were no longer in shock about their arrival in the Mirror Universe. This did not mean that they were relaxed or rested, but they were not overwhelmed by the events.

The key point was that these Players were generally not so limited in Aether. If it was possible not to fight at all during an Ordeal, they had necessarily gained something from it, either through their new stats or their rewards.

Moreover, a Player was rarely alone when joining a Red Cube. After months of Ordeal together, most Players had formed bonds and groups or factions eventually formed.

This was the reason why Jake had a relative trust in Will, Kyle and Sarah. He wouldn't trust them with his life, far from it, but he had a good idea of their mentality and what they were capable of. In any case, being in good company was always better than wandering alone in a hostile world where factions of all races were growing at breakneck speed.

After passing through a belt of tents, blankets and campfires, they finally arrived at the foot of the large carbon-grey structures with their various geometric shapes.

With no walls or guards, Jake wondered why no one had set up camp directly in the city, but he got his answer immediately when he was stopped by an invisible force field.

Ao ovfo qmquro, f ruj rmoadahfoamr dzmq ovu Ozfhiu Swlouq  
zulmprtut ar val quart, ardmzqare vaq ovfo vu vft om nfw frmovuz duu

om urouz ovu haow jfiil. Tval oaqu ovu nzahu jfl lufo 5 Auovuz nmarol.

Jake gnashed his teeth when he read the notification, but he still agreed to pay. After killing a few flying Digestors, he was back up to 200 points and some, but that could be gone very quickly considering the price of a simple translator.

The drone that had welcomed them had long ago abandoned them to take care of other newcomers. In fact, during their few minutes walk to the city, dozens of other aliens had in turn appeared on the Black Cube's edge.

As he squinted at them, Jake recognized the humanoid alien with dendrites instead of hair among the newcomers. He hadn't forgotten the plasma blast it had fired to bring down a huge Digestor.

Even after being buried by an avalanche of Digestors, the alien was unharmed. Its black metal armor was still intact, not even the silvery blood of its victims could taint it.

Its posture was as arrogant as it was provocative, and even when faced with the drone trying to talk to it, Jake could see the creature's fists opening and closing unintentionally, as if it was barely holding back from pulverizing the machine with a punch.

In any case, however powerful this alien may be, he would have to bend to the rules of the Oracle as well, so for now they had nothing to fear. Jake checked whether everyone had enough Aether to get through the force field, and when he saw that they did, he set off again.

Unsure, they decided to go to the largest structure which was a sort of huge cylinder near the center of the city, about 50 meters in diameter and higher than the tallest skyscrapers on Earth.

When they arrived in front of it, the group contemplated the structure in search of a way in. Jake scrutinized, then touched the light symbols inscribed all over the surface of the structure, but no notification of the System popped out.

‘Xi, can you read these symbols?’ Jake asked tentatively.

[I can. It says, ‘The Oracle Playground.’]

‘...’

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