

The Oracle Paths

Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

Chapter 154 - The Oracle Playground

Jake wasn't sure if it was the right place to visit first, but now that they were out front, they could afford to take a look. As long as he didn't have Aether to spend it wouldn't bother him.

'How do I get in?' Jake asked in his mind.

[Just like the other cubes. By walking through it. If you're in doubt, simple physical contact should give you the answer.] Xi answered calmly.

'Impossible, I've already touched the symbols on the wall.' Jake replied, frowning confusedly.

[But you weren't trying to get in. Try again with the intention of entering the building.]

'Okay, I'll test that.'

Following Xi's advice, he put his hand against the carbon grey surface again and this time a notification from the System asked him if he wished to enter. For once and to his great satisfaction no Aether was charged.

When Jake agreed, part of the smooth surface of the wall in front of him began to swirl and liquefy in front of him, quickly forming a vortex of liquid metal approximately his size. Realizing it was the equivalent of a door, he walked towards it, disappearing inside as in a Stargate.

Indoors, a vast space much more attractive than the outside revealed itself before his eyes. At last, he had the impression of finally returning to the shopping malls he was used to, but more futuristic.

The carbon grey metal still made up all the walls and furniture, but a very different atmosphere resulted from it. In the huge hall in which it was located, which was larger than an airport terminal, dozens of wide corridors were connected.

Saerl hmsuzut jaov lwqgmil ar ovu ifrepfeu md ovu Mazzmz Urasuzlu nzuhutut ovuq. Buvart ovuq juzu suzw tadduzuro, qphv iull fzoadahafi luooarel. Tval efsu ovu aqzullamr md f hmqniuou hvfreu md foqmlnvuzu frt hpiopzu.

In general, the Oracle Playground seemed to be a patchwork of different leisure places with their own characteristics depending on the purpose and target species. Some spaces seemed mixed while others seemed to be reserved for certain types of species or individuals only.

The place was so large that it was impossible to see its limits, not to mention the countless elevators and stairs leading to the upper floors. Like the Black Cube, these buildings seemed to be equipped with a space technology that could greatly increase the size of the interior.

Every ten or fifteen meters, a terminal resembling a metal sausage with a blue light vein was planted in the ground, waiting to be consulted. Spherical drones like the ones that had hosted them were also floating around, sometimes static, sometimes shooting at full speed while carrying something, often a Blue or Silver Cube.

[Touch one of these posts, there should be a map of the complex available.]

Listening to her instructions, Jake walked up to one of those metal blocks and put his hand on it. A map was then projected directly into his mind and all he had to do was focus on one place to get information on the subject. Unfortunately, it was still in the mysterious Mirror Universe language that he didn't understand yet.

‘Xi, can you understand it?’

[Give me a moment...]

Meanwhile, the rest of his group had also entered the building through the vortex that Jake had used to get in. Even his cat eventually caught up with him, although it took the reassuring petting of Sarah and Tim to convince him to enter the vortex.

To Crunch, although his intelligence had improved significantly, the vortex was like a wall. Seeing them disappear one by one didn't comfort him despite the fact that his own Shadow Guide showed no hesitation in following them.

Efhv md ovuq usuropfiiw bmarut frmovuz ouzqarfi iacu Jfcu, ialourare om ovuaz Ozfhiu Aal dmz qmzu ardmzqfoamr. Al Xa ozfrlifout ovu lwqgmil lvu zuhmeraxut, mz fo iuflo jfl fiimjut om zuquqguz, ovu lwqgmil mr val qurofi qfn juzu ezftpfiw zunifhut gw ovu Ereialv vu jfl dfqaiatz jaov.

It turned out that the Oracle Playground was compartmentalized by species, but also by Oracle Rank. There were public spaces that everyone could go to, but others were reserved for a restricted audience.

Locating the area reserved for ‘humanoids’ on his map, he also found by zooming in another sub-section for humans. The term human in the Mirror Universe, which had a slightly different

meaning, encompassed species with very similar physical appearances and capable of communicating with their vocal cords.

In practice, their genetics and internal structure could be very different. Such as having three hearts, the digestive system of an insect or the ability to change shape. In any case, if a species could adopt a human form or come close to it, it could enter.

Even then, some places were not accessible to all humans. As with a truck exceeding a certain height in a tunnel, there were also size limits to be respected and areas reserved for giants or dwarf races also existed.

On this point, the Oracle's organization was impressive, as it seemed to have planned enough to accommodate virtually every possible species.

The hall they were in was rather empty except for a few aliens passing by here and there. Jake didn't intend to open his horizons by chatting with other aliens, so he took a big step towards the section reserved for humans, Crunch on his heels.

Thanks to his Pet Contract, he was considered Jake's property and could thus accompany him. However, any infraction committed by the cat would be the responsibility of its owner and just for that reason alone Jake would not let the cat out of his sight for more than a few seconds.

Will, Sarah, Kyle and Tim joined him shortly afterwards, equally excited to finally meet other humans in a safe place. With a little luck, they could even find people they knew, even if the probability was extremely low.

The group crossed the corridor leading to the humanoid section, which then led them to another hall where Orange Cubes of various sizes were waiting for them, levitating slightly above the ground.

Following their map, they entered one of the Cubes of their size after accepting the System's notification. They reappeared a fraction of a second later on another floor in the middle of a plaza around which a sort of mini city had been erected. The sky was a cloudless blue, but was different from place to place, reminding them that it was actually a ceiling on which an image was projected.

The plaza was paved with polished stones, just like the roads, with a fountain in the middle. Gardens and parks were visible nearby, with wooden benches at regular intervals. Hotels, houses and other villas with different architectures occupied a good part of this human recreational town, the rest being dedicated to leisure facilities.

There was everything from sports complexes, swimming pools, a cinema, theater, casino, bars and restaurants, a brothel and even an amusement park. More traditional shops offered a variety of objects and foods from their home planets, but for the time being human-shaped drones were used as vendors. With their blue-light-veined metal bodies and the Blue Cubes behind them, Jake had no doubt that the prices would be exorbitant.

Once again, he wasn't disappointed. In a kind of bakery where human pastries from the entire Mirror Universe were available, he discovered by consulting the drone that a simple apple pie cost 10 Aether points.

Jake understood Aslael's words better when he explained that all transactions in the Mirror Universe were done using Aether. Indeed, if a normal Civilian hoped to survive peacefully in an Oracle City, he

would need a stable supply of Aether. By refusing to participate in Ordeals or kill Digestors it was almost impossible.

He did notice, however, that most of the shops were empty and available for sale, as were most of the residences. Instead of stupidly buying a pizza for 20 Aether points, there was probably a profit to be made for the one who would open his own pizzeria. However, to do so, you still had to get the ingredients.

There was the equivalent of a supermarket, but Jake realized with surprise that the prices in Aether were very close to the dishes and pastries made and sold by the Oracle drones. The profit margin by cooking the ingredients sold by the System was too low.

But more importantly, to have a chance, you needed customers. And for the time being, the Oracle Playground in this Oracle City was appallingly empty. Since their arrival in the center of the plaza, the group hadn't met anyone.
