

The Oracle Paths

Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

Chapter 221 - Uncle Kalen

His uncle was clearly in great shape and had even managed to put on some weight, suggesting that his stay on the B842 was tantamount to a holiday. Jake only needed a glance to figure out that Kalen hadn't participated in any Ordeal yet.

His aura was normal, as were his movements. An Evolver had something different in his gaze and the increased stats were passively manifested by a stronger and slower beating heart, a lighter step and a propensity to speak very fast. The last phenomenon was due to the increase in Agility and Intelligence which gave a slower perception of time.

Even Jake still had the greatest difficulty controlling his speech rate when talking to normal people. Luckily, the people he was associating with these days were all Evolvers who had maximized their Agility, with the possible exception of Will.

That was in the past, though, since after selling the carcass of the Rank 7 Digestor, Will had got more than enough Aether to maximize his physical stats.

Upon seeing his daughter, Kalen spread his arms and gave her a big smile. Anya dived into her father's arms, but quickly put an end to the embrace so as not to embarrass the audience present, even though Jake was used to it.

Having also lost her mother in the False Third World War, her father Kalen had been Anya's only parental presence during her childhood.

Jake held his uncle in high esteem for the same reasons, but in spite of all this, their bond remained different. Kalen was not his father, although he considered him as such.

After Kalen concluded the reunion hug with his daughter, Kalen looked around at the newcomers in search of his nephew, but his gaze passed Jake without stopping. His uncle hadn't recognized him...

It had to be said that Jake had changed a lot in a few months. Taller, from a slightly chubby and ungainly physique to a spartan body, from pale acneic skin to healthy, tanned skin. If one added to this the beginning of his transformation brought about by the assimilation of the two bloodlines, Jake did not indeed have much in common with his former self.

Above all, what had radically changed between the old him and the present Jake was the attitude. The former was reserved, introverted and shy, whereas Jake was now giving off all the behavioural signals of a person that should absolutely not be provoked.

After a while, his uncle's gaze finally settled on him after having reasoned by elimination.

'Jake?' His uncle's tone was one of utter skepticism.

'It's been a while, Uncle Kalen.' Jake chuckled with a strong emotion of joy, that he tried hard to hide.

Realizing it was indeed his nephew, Kalen spread his arms again to give his nephew a manly hug. Kalen and Jake were originally the same height with a similar build, but Jake's physical transformation turned the scene supposedly moving into an embarrassing and awkward situation.

Nmo mriw jfl Jfcu fiqmlo ojahu fl jatu, ar qplhiu fimru, gpo vu jfl rmj f emmt vfid vuft ofiiuz... Taq frt Kwiu vft f lozmre pzeu om ifpev, gpo ovuw zudzfarut dzmq tmare lm. Adouz fii, ovu gmtwepfztl epfztare ovu qfrlamr juzu loaii ovuzu, frt Jfcu vaqluid jfl rmo f nuzlmr crmjrdmz val lurlu md vpmz.

To be exact... Jake never laughed at their jokes and only loosened up on rare occasions. Before making fun of him and his uncle, they would wait until they got to know them better. After all, not everyone had a sense of self-deprecation.

If Jake could read their minds, he would have laughed grudgingly. Who dared to say he didn't have a sense of humour? Like any good lonely introvert, he had a strong sense of self-mockery and spent his time making fun of everything and anything. The only difference was that he mostly kept his remarks to himself.

' Ahem, you can let go of me. 'Kalen stammered with a feeling of ridicule. What the hell did his damn nephew eat to change that much?!

Jake released his uncle and realized he'd hugged the poor man a little too tight. Although the Aether density had almost tripled in the last few days, Kalen's body was not at all ready to endure such a hug. His face was red and congested like a person who almost choked.

Kalen was then introduced to the rest of the group accompanying Jake, the middle-aged man embarrassing them all by hand-kissing Sarah as if he was about to court a queen.

The young woman who was still under the influence of her new Myrmidian bloodline acted as if it were the most natural order of things, her smugness having absolutely no boundaries.

Jake refrained from calling his Uncle to order, but the twitching of his lip showed how much he was dying to slap Sarah and his Uncle to bring them back to their senses.

A rich man looking for a new conquest and a gold digger looking for attention... The perfect combo.

He knew his uncle's skirt chasing nature, who had never remarried after his wife's death, but Sarah was no longer herself. Or was she? Either way, it didn't concern him, as long as it didn't affect their chances of survival in the next Ordeal.

'Grandpa's here?' Anya asked in a hurried tone after the introductions were over.

Uncle Kalen's cheerful and gracious expression immediately returned to his serious face.

'He's here... and he's waiting for all of you.'

As they walked through the garden leading to the mansion, Kalen gave them a short briefing, especially for Jake and his friends, so that they would not be completely lost when they met the rest of the family.

'As you know,' he narrated calmly. 'The second Ordeal is special. My father Antoine wants as many Wilderths to participate as possible at the same time to maximize our chances. This second Ordeal has been a disaster for us so far. Only Vincent has lasted more than half an hour inside.'

Antoine was their grandfather's first name and he was the man who held the family in an iron fist. While he was talking, they had reached the interior of the manor house, which turned out to be as luxurious as they imagined, Kalen took them up a long spiral staircase over two floors.

‘And Anya?’ Jake cut him off with a sideways glance at his cousin.

‘I did my second Ordeal with my government squad. ‘The young woman explained with a shrug of her shoulders and an indifferent look on her face. ‘My performance was rather mediocre, but I lasted a few hours. It’s an Ordeal that’s a bit special because of the way it works. The Earth Government refuses to share the names of those who have performed well at their second Ordeal, but they are easy to recognize because after that they are treated differently as if each of them were emissaries of the Oracle himself. They also join the Elite Program afterwards if they hadn’t already.’

‘That’s right. ‘Kalen confirmed with a nod. ‘Since it’s impossible to reveal the contents of an Ordeal to those who haven’t yet participated, my father has been looking for roundabout ways to increase our chances of success.’

‘It won’t work...’ Anya scoffed sarcastically to hide a shiver of dread as she recalled the unfolding of her own Ordeal.

‘Probably not, but it’s better than nothing. You know my father. He’s not the kind of man who does things randomly. He completed his Second Ordeal alone before deciding on the plan.’

‘Grandpa has completed his second Ordeal?!’ Anya exclaimed in complete shock.

Jake was equally stunned. He knew that his grandfather was in great shape and had an adventurous character, but to attempt an Ordeal on his own was a real surprise.

‘Yes...’ Kalen replied before silently walking into a slightly half-open double door.

Knock, knock.

‘Come in. ‘A deep, low voice echoed from the other side of the door.

Taking a deep breath, Kalen pushed the two doors open and walked serenely into the room with his daughter and nephew in his wake.

Within, a large living room awaited them with numerous leather sofas and armchairs, carpets and luxury furniture. The floor was covered with varnished parquet and the lighting was provided by the false sun outside, although the red curtains were drawn. Tea and biscuits were served on a few coffee tables near the armchairs.

In each of these armchairs, young men and women more or less resembling them were seated, usually of a similar age to their own, ranging from 15 to 30 years old.

One chair in the middle of the room was occupied by an old man looking like an older, but paradoxically more athletic version of his uncle Kalen.

Al ovuw fzzasut, ovuaz ezfrtdfovuz limjiw npo tmjr val hpn md ouf, frt ovur hifnnut val vfrtl om tuhifzu ovu lofzo md ovu quuoare.