

The Oracle Paths

Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

Chapter 226 - The Second Ordeal begins!

Jake was already well equipped, but when he discovered many boxes full of ammunition of all types, he took the opportunity to replenish his supplies. He still had his old apartment to clear out, which was still on the same islet lost in the middle of a lake, but it was possible that a group of vagrants had already squatted and robbed it, just as he himself had ransacked a farm without the slightest restraint.

Being already well-equipped, he soon lost interest in the family armoury, which was not worth the one at the New Earth Research Center. Not everyone was, however. Even though almost everyone had decent equipment, one could never be too careful.

Based on his memories of his first Ordeal, there was indeed little chance that this equipment could be taken to the Ordeal World with them, but if their grandfather felt it was necessary, it was better to trust him. Jake himself, was heavily equipped, ready for any unforeseen situation. He would kick himself if he was ever caught in a difficult situation for having chosen to travel light.

Each of the participants in his family received a gun and an assault rifle if they didn't have one, and donned a bulletproof vest or protective gear for those lacking them. It was possible to guess at a glance who had never carried a gun, and it turned out that everyone except his Aunt Aurelie was perfectly comfortable with these weapons.

He was much more pessimistic when he saw the teenager Tim playing with his new machine gun to impress his cousin Lily, but the gold medal went to Enya and Esya who were c ar essing the barrel of their rifle with fascination.

‘Cough, cough...’ Jake cleared his throat next to them to bring them back to the moment.

They blushed slightly as they put away their new weapons and when they saw that everyone was ready, Jake’s grandfather motioned for them to follow after him again.

The group walked through the city of the Oracle Playground at a good pace until they reached one of the cobblestone squares surrounding the city where the Orange Cubes were located. All of them were accustomed to the procedure, and disappeared after the old man and accompanied him through the meandering Oracle Playground until they returned to the filtered air of an Oracle Shelter.

A raevo lcw oareut jaov ezuur, narc frt npzniu ezuuout ovuq. Tvu ouqnuzfopzu jfl himlu om xuzm frt qfrw qmmrl frt lofzl hmpit gu talhuzrut ovzmpbev ovu ozfrliphuro jfiil md ovu Bifhc Cpgu. Tval Ozfhiu Svuiouz jfl imhfout ar f nmifz xmru frt ovulu hmimpzl ar ovu lcw hfqu dzmq ovu fpzmfz gmzufial.

Indifferent to the phenomenon, the old man headed without delay towards the pentagonal building containing the various Halls. The layout of the Oracle Buildings was completely identical to the Oracle Shelter that Jake was used to, but more aliens were walking around inside the force field.

Ignoring the misery of the refugees clustering together outside the force field to keep themselves warm, the group entered the Player Hall where they found a spacious, cozy bar with a saloon atmosphere.

Jake had never ventured deeper into the Hall before, but their grandfather was clearly a regular there. He walked around the bar, ignoring the humanoid Players squinting at them, and led them down a long corridor of a few hundred meters, at the end of which a huge Red Cube, comparable to the one he had seen in the cyan desert, was waiting for them.

Jake had the lingering image in his mind of a Red Cube standing outdoors in the center of the pentagonal building, but this one was still inside the Player Hall. Another corridor allowed them to continue on their way, probably leading to more Red Cubes.

This was much more convenient, since thanks to the many Red Cubes and their distribution, the space where they were located was not crowded with campers of all species as it was during his first Ordeal. A few thousand mainly human-looking individuals were calmly waiting for the Red Cube to open up its doors to them.

The old man serenely chose a free place, then stood with his arms folded and ramrod straight, awaiting the fateful moment as he stared at the enormous Red Cube. The rest of the group did the same, their breathing slowing down as they mentally conditioned themselves for the unknown ordeal that loomed before them.

Eventually, at eight o'clock sharp, the Red Cube began flashing wildly, flickering faster and faster with a shrill, war siren-like sound. Those waiting too close to the Cube were expelled from the area by the Oracle drones patrolling the room to make way for the exiting Players.

A few minutes later, the light from the Red Cube stabilized and a first wave of participants with lost expressions, or on the contrary full of anger or regret emerged from the Red Cube by the hundreds, until they soon formed a group of about ten thousand people.

The Oracle drones evacuated these participants in an orderly fashion and the first wave of losers continued to stream out until about 25,000 participants with ragged faces had departed the venue.

Adouz f lvmzo qmquro md laiurhu frt arfhoamr, ovu luhmrt jfsu
uquzeut ar opzr, hmrlaloare md mriw f duj ovmplfrt artasatpfil.
Lfloiw, f duj vpertzut Pifwuzl lozmtu jaov taeraow mpo md ovu Rut
Cpgu, ovuaz nmalu frt hmqnmlpzu zudiuhoare om fii vmj
ukhunoamrfi ovuw juzu.

These Players emitted an incredible aura of dangerousness and most of them gave the impression of coming out of a battlefield. Jake wasn't confident that he could defeat any of them in a fair fight.

'These are the participants of a fourth Ordeal.' His grandfather commented coldly.

Jake raised an intrigued eyebrow. Where did his grandfather draw that certainty from? Luckily, Lily, his youngest cousin, asked the question for him, satisfying his curiosity and sparing his saliva.

'Hmmm, I spotted a few familiar faces.' The old man chuckled in an evasive tone.

A few of his cousins and his uncle Elijah nodded as if that explanation was perfectly reasonable, but Jake would have liked to know why the old man hadn't hurried to greet them if he knew them so well. Naturally, he had no intention of asking his grandfather for the answer.

Now that all the participants of the previous Ordeal had left the premises, the Players, patiently waiting for their turn, began to advance towards the Red Cube without rushing. Since violence was prohibited in the Oracle Cities, there was no tension between participants.

One by one the Players present entered the Red Cube and disappeared without so much as a sound. When it was their turn, their grandfather reminded them one last time to be extremely vigilant and persevere no matter what was ahead of them.

Lily threw herself into her father's arms, tears in her eyes, and Tim's hitherto relaxed expression broke down, his lower lip and eyebrows trembling with grief. He had just remembered the death of his mother who had died shortly before his first Ordeal. Rubbing his eyes to hide his tears, he ran into the Red Cube without saying farewell to anyone.

There wasn't much Jake or the rest of the group could do to console the teenager and it was already too late. Jake simply waved 'See you soon' to his comrades, and walked to the Red Cube too, ignoring his grandfather and his cousins.

After a few days in his family's mansion, he had partially digested the resentment and negative emotions he felt towards them, but the time was just too short.

Regardless of his grandfather's goodwill or his cousins' attempts to communicate, he was simply not at ease or comfortable in their presence. He always felt like a tiger in the middle of a pack of hyenas, even though he was aware that it was mostly in his head.

As he crossed the Red Cube, he found that dark, lightless space where he could no longer feel his own body. A timeless space where it was easy to forget his own existence and where he had no need to breathe.

Jake chatted with Xi to pass the time, until finally the long-awaited notification of the Oracle System pops up in his mind. Impatient, but with a slight stage fright, he discovered the setting of his second Ordeal with a certain amount of bafflement. This Ordeal was nothing like his first one.

[Participant: Jake Wilderth, Myrtharian.]

[Successful Ordeals: 1.]

[Awaiting matchmaking for Second Ordeal. Species allowed:
Humanoids.]

[...]

[Matchmaking complete, Second Ordeal determined.]

[Type: Simulation/ Battle Royale]

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[Number of participants: 11,658,435]

[Background:]

[The giant asteroid Elinor VXIII is an abandoned former System A0 outpost. The purpose of this outpost was to prepare the Zhorion Warriors to face the threats of the Mirror Universe.]

[The place has long since been ravaged and has become uninhabitable after millennia of war, but a few Zhorion survivors have made it their home and continue to carry on their traditions away from the eyes of the Oracle.]

[Enter one of the Sanctuary Bubbles with your own identity, where these survivors thrive away from the rest of the world and endure the hardships the Sanctuary Bubble will put you through. An Oracle Guardian will lead you there. Each trial will make you stronger and unique rewards await the ultimate winners.]

[Main Mission: Enter Sanctum Bubble]

[Penalty for failure: None.]

[Benefits and Specifics during Mission Time:]

[- Spacesuit to withstand the vacuum of space and breathe]

[Mfw dfou jmzc ar wmpz dfsmz.]

No sooner had Jake finished reading the introductory report than he felt his consciousness being swept away by a mysterious, unstoppable force. When he regained the sensation of his body and the ground under his feet, he reopened his eyes.

He was now on a huge asteroid, lost in the sidereal void.