

The Oracle Paths

Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

Chapter 269 - Night in the Storm

Sarah and Tim stared at him for a long minute in amazement without daring to break the silence, but the young blonde just couldn't help but ask the question that was bugging her.

'Uh, are you really going to leave them out in the cold like that?' She asked hesitantly.

'Why not?' Jake replied without the slightest qualms.

'But if they don't find a safe place quickly, it might be dangerous for them if the storm turns out to be as fierce as the current weather suggests.'

'They're Evolvers with their Aether stats maxed out or close to it. As long as they don't spend the night naked in a blizzard, I doubt a storm could kill them.' Jake brushed off her argument with an irritated wave of his hand.

'What could they have done to make you hate them so much?' Sarah asked, her eyes wide open in amazement. She was aware of his social ineptitude and his taciturn nature, but she didn't know he could hold such a grudge.

Jake had no intention of justifying himself, so he simply retorted, 'They deserve what happens to them.' before sitting cross-legged on his bed of stone and furs and closing his eyes to start meditating. Whenever he had some free time, he would use it to study the Green Soul Stone or perfect his Aether manipulation in order to create an Aether Core.

He might not always have a Soul Stone like this to rejuvenate his mind after overuse of Aether skills, and it was only really effective at night when it

released its precious accumulated Soul Energy. Furthermore, even if this hadn't happened yet, he couldn't ignore the possibility of running into an opponent with a Spirit Body strong enough to monopolize control of the Aether in an entire area.

If that happened, all of his Aether skills would become unusable at close range. This was an easy problem to solve when the Spirit Body's range was short, but it would become a fatal handicap when the average Player became able to extend his Extrasensory Perception over several kilometers. It wasn't as if he could keep his distance at all times from his enemies in such a situation.

Sarah stood there like a pole for a few more seconds, biting her lip in frustration, but faced with his indifference, she decided not to bother anymore. Although she was arrogant and selfish, she still had some empathy in her heart. Especially when it required very little effort on her part.

Letting these two Players spend the night from her perspective was only beneficial, but if Jake didn't want them, it wasn't as if she thought she could convince him.

As for Tim, he didn't give a damn. He didn't know who they were and Jake was the law. If he didn't want them, it just meant there was something wrong with these two people. His reasoning was really that straightforward.

For a few minutes, they heard Lu Yan and Lu Yifeng talking in Chinese with a worried tone on the other side of the door, and then the thud of their footsteps eventually faded away along with long sighs. Their lives then returned to normal and each went about his or her business.

Jake was already sweating profusely and his frowning eyebrows betrayed intense concentration. Tim and Sarah had already asked him what he was doing a few days earlier to be in this state, but even after he had told them about all the benefits of an Aether Core, they hadn't deemed it necessary to create one.

In fact, none of them had any Aether Skills that required Extracorporeal Aether Control. Tim's Aether Skills could be considered to require long distance Aether control, but unfortunately there was no observable Aether movement to indicate that Tim could consciously influence the process.

Even if he could create an Aether Core, he wouldn't know what to do with it and it was unlikely to make any difference. This was naive and if Jake had known of his abilities he would certainly have done more to encourage him to create his own Aether Core. No matter how miraculous luck or perception of danger might seem, the energy driving these skills had to come from somewhere.

Thus, choosing not to bother him, Sarah began to skin the woolly rhino they had left outside and Tim proceeded to practice the axe katas he had learnt in the previous Ordeal, felling a few more trees in the process.

Once his two comrades were outside, Jake opened his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. He knew that Lu Yifeng at the very least did not deserve to be thrown out like that, but he really could not trust Lu Yan.

When he was weaker and naive he didn't pay particular attention to his instincts, but now that his Intelligence and Perception had taken a new step, he was much more aware of the threats posed by the people orbiting around him. Even at this stage, he still didn't trust anyone, not even the kid.

As smart as Tim thought he was, it was easy for Jake and Sarah to realize that he was hiding something. No matter how mature the child might seem for his age because of his experiences and his Intelligence Aether, he was still a child. Expecting him to be a flawless actor was inconceivable.

After all, even Jake could barely control his facial muscles with his dexterity, but that didn't mean he could readily express even the most subtle emotions. More importantly, it was even harder to lie all the time without giving

himself away. Until proven otherwise, Tim did not have a Multitasking ability.

In their group, only Sarah and perhaps Will could be considered good speakers and with their new stats it had become almost impossible to probe them. As far as Jake knew, the young woman's giggles, smirks, and grimaces could all be intentional and not spontaneous.

That was why Jake was suspicious of Lu Yan. Even though she was already gifted long before the First Ordeal, there was still something fake about her behavior, as if she was not feeling emotions normally. The increase in her Intelligence had not helped and made her even more cold and inexpressive.

Jake really wondered how Lu Yifeng could be oblivious to his sister's true nature. Unless he was fooling himself by idealizing his little sister, it was impossible. As such, no matter how naive and candid Lu Yifeng may appear, it was wiser to assume that he condoned his sister's eccentricities and had turned a blind eye to her potential crimes.

Well, maybe he was just paranoid and this young woman was simply even more antisocial than he was.

Exhaling deeply to clear his head, he extended his senses to the outside of the building to check if everything was going well outside and seeing that the siblings were really gone, he immersed himself once more in his Aether Core creation training.

The hours flew by and the sun finally gave way to the stars. Sarah and Tim had returned home shortly afterwards with the storm approaching and were practicing in their room.

The wind had increased in intensity and the murmur of the wind blowing against the stone was so loud that they were likely to stay awake all night. Soon the rumble of thunder resounded, startling them all. A few seconds later, the repeated impact of the hailstones on the stone house roof forced them to halt their activities for good.

Contemplative, Jake opened the door separating them from the storm outside and what he witnessed shocked him deeply. Ice hailstones as big as pine cones and a biting cold almost burning his skin. Thinking back to what he had said earlier, he was no longer so confident about the siblings' chances of survival.

'Forget it...'

If they returned, he was willing to open the door as long as he could keep his eyes on them, but this was unlikely. The stone walls couldn't keep the cold out indefinitely, and as incredible as it was, the temperature was still dropping.

Jake lit a fire in the fireplace by placing his incandescent hand against a log and quickly the heat spread throughout the residence, almost making them forget about the storm outside. The group then roasted one of the woolly rhino's legs and feasted while sharing a few anecdotes about their past lives.

As they were about to go to bed, or in Jake's case meditate again, a heart-rending scream echoed outside, followed by an agonizing cry that sounded very much like Lu Yifeng's. Unsurprisingly, someone started banging on their door a few minutes later accompanied by a distraught woman's voice.

'Please, is there anyone there? I have a wounded with me! Please open the door! He won't survive long like this!

'It's not Lu Yan...'

Jake realized as he jumped out of bed with his machete.

And yet he actually knew that voice. Tim next to him seemed to have recognized it too and his childish face was quivering with excitement.