

The Oracle Paths

Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

Chapter 348 - Rewards (part 1)

Jake, who had previously remained relatively unmoved, showed strong excitement for the first time. He was eager to find out what kind of rewards the Ancient Designer could offer, but it certainly wouldn't be too shabby.

Since they were in a lab and Jake had become accustomed to the Oracle System interface, he expected either a special material reward or a list of options to choose from a catalog, but the reality turned out to be slightly different from his predictions.

Xion Zolvhur simply beckoned him to follow him to another section of his lab, which contained several weird machines, including a miniaturized version of the platform where the old man had produced some Silver Liquid Alloy before their very eyes.

'Let me fill you in on what kind of rewards I'm offering and why the Oracle is willing to let me off the hook.' The Zhorion announced pompously as he tapped a rhomboid-shaped device next to him to catch his interest. 'As one of the Ancient Designers involved in the development of the prototype Oracle Devices, I am naturally familiar with all the details and subtleties of these machines.'

So far, Jake was not surprised. He had already considered the possibility that the final reward might involve his bracelet. But what happened next struck him much more deeply.

' Nowadays, the Oracle System can be seen as a stand-alone system. The artificial intelligence that governs its functioning does not theoretically need anything or anyone to continue to operate. Connected to the entire Mirror

Universe and each individual with a wristband or having been scanned, the system can continue to evolve continuously through a form of deep-learning. Everything you think or even invent is added to the already huge database of the Oracle System.

‘New Aether Spells are added to the Oracle Store catalog every day with the agreement of their inventors in exchange for royalties. However, I certainly don’t need to explain to you that this is just a front. The Oracle and its direct minions do not need to respect these facade rules. As long as you have a bracelet, every thought you have is known to the Oracle System and therefore no longer belongs to you... ‘

The old man took a short pause and gauged the expression of the human in front of him. Jake may have already been aware of the Oracle’s abusive totalitarianism, but at that moment his face could hardly have been more gloomy. Seeing that his words were being taken seriously, the Ancient Designer nodded with satisfaction and resumed his speech.

‘The same goes for the Oracle Device Skills. If an Evolver or Player manages to develop a new Oracle Skill, it will be added to the Oracle Store as long as it does not go against the Oracle’s best interests. Nevertheless, if a talented scientist manages to invent, for example, an algorithm capable of hacking the Oracle System or nullifying the prices in the Oracle Store, such an individual shall be immediately punished to the extent of his crime. Under normal circumstances, it is impossible for such a technology to see the light of day.

‘As time goes by, a strict categorization of these Oracle Device Skills has been established and it is now very rare for a new Oracle Skill to be invented. Over the millennia, all the flaws in the Oracle System have been discovered by talented Evolvers, but as a result were also immediately corrected. Today’s Oracle System is considered foolproof, because the Aetheric source code and its core infrastructure are absolutely inaccessible to the public. Even a top-ranking Oracle Overseer does not have access to this information.

‘That’s where I come in. Having participated in its creation, the Oracle System holds no secrets for me and my power is such that I am not a slave to it either. For complex reasons, the Oracle tolerates my presence. Any Player who manages to meet me will be rewarded with a custom-made Oracle Device Skill.’

At that very moment, a mental interface very similar to the Oracle Store appeared before his eyes, but the number of Oracle Skills offered was much smaller. It only took Jake a few minutes to go around it, but his jaw never closed once during his reading, as his surprise was overwhelming.

Each Oracle Skill offered was more unique and exaggerated than the others. Compared to the Oracle Store Skills that Jake had memorized, they all had something extra that made them extremely valuable.

[AD Oracle Cloaking lv11]: The owner of the Oracle Device can opt out of Evolvers’ Oracle Paths that have an Oracle Rank two ranks higher than his for a set period of time proportional to the Aether spent. Effect duration: 60min, Aether Cost: 20M Aether pts per activation].

[AD PzmQmoamr isi1: Tvu mjruz md ovu Ozfhiu Dusahu hfr ouQnmzfaizw gu ezfrou ovu nzasaiueul ojm zfrcl fgmsu val hpzzuro Ozfhiu Rfrc. Dpzfoamr md udduho: 60Qar, Auovuz Cml: 100M Auovuz nol nuz fhoasfoamr]

[AD Oracle Soldes lv11: All resources in the Oracle Store will see their price reduced by 20% when activating this skill. Duration of effect: 60min. Aether Cost: 1B Aether pts.]

[AD Oracle Shield lv11: An indestructible spherical force field enveloping the owner of the Oracle Device will be generated. Maximum radius: 1 meter. Effect duration: 10 seconds. Aether Cost: 100M Aether pts per activation.]

[AD Oracle Heal lv11: The owner of the Oracle Device will have his injuries, regardless of severity, treated instantly. Number of uses: 2 times per Ordeal. Outside Ordeals: the Aether Cost is 1000 times that of the Green Cube.]

[AD Portable Oracle Store lv11: The owner of the Oracle Device can access the Oracle Store from anywhere, including during an Ordeal, and his purchases will be delivered instantly. However, the prices of the goods in the Oracle Store will be 100 times more expensive. Regardless of the item purchased, a shipping fee of 10M Aether pts will be charged.]

[AD Oracle Space Storage lv11: The owner of the Oracle Device will be able to access a separate dimension to store his belongings. 1 cubic meter of space for every ton of liquid alloy the bracelet contains.]

[...]

The initials AD preceding each Oracle Skill attested that Xion Zolvhur, an Ancient Designer, was its creator. All these skills also existed in the Oracle Store, but their effects were far inferior. The Oracle Cloaking lv11, for example, could normally only hide from Oracle Device Users one rank higher.

The Aether cost for each activation was usually astronomical, but each of these Oracle Skills could completely reverse the most critical situations.

If Jake, for example, had possessed this Oracle Cloaking skill, he could have defeated Bawopi without any help. The Promotion Skill was even better by allowing him to directly raise his Oracle Rank to the Nosk' level.

Tvu Ozfhiu Svauit film ukalout ar ovu Ozfhiu Somzu, gpo aol rmzqfi isi 1 suzlamr mriw hmsuzut ovu gmtw md aol ifprhvuz. Tvu hmlo md fhoasfoamr jfl film ojahu fl vaev. Id Jfcu vft guur uypannut jaov oval lcaii jvur Bfjma tuomrfout, vu hmpit vfsu jficut fjfw prvfzqut jaov rm uddmzo fo fii.

Alternatively, the Oracle Heal skill would have allowed him to recover instantly. Ruby would never have been given the opportunity to take advantage of his weakness.

In addition to these Oracle Skills with huge potential, but still very situational, there were also all sorts of offensive, defensive and auxiliary Oracle Skills. They were different from the Aether Skills or Spells in that their effects were much more decisive, but all of them had a power at least two ranks above the Aether Spells of the same level, albeit at a much higher activation cost.

Jake considered these Oracle Device Skills to be stupid choices. At the rate his stats and abilities were increasing, the possibility that these skills would become obsolete was very real. Nevertheless, some of them could still move his heart, such as this one:

[AD Mechanical Hydra lv11: The owner of the Oracle Device will summon a 9-headed mechanical hydra that can resurrect as long as its energy has not been depleted or its core remains intact. The generated monster will have its Aether and Body stats set to 500 as well as the Grade 8 Hydra Bloodline. Activation cost: 1B Aether points.]

Such a monster was not a real hydra, but had all the capabilities of one. Jake didn't know exactly what this Hydra Bloodline was, but by name alone he could imagine its lethality. The most incredible thing about this Aether Skill was that it had no time limit. Once the Mechanical Hydra was summoned, it would not disappear and would continue to follow its summoner until its internal energy was exhausted.

If an Evolver had a way to recharge that energy, it was like acquiring a powerful guardian permanently!

Jake's mind was so tortured by all of these tantalizing rewards that he was on the verge of losing his mind. He felt like a hungry child in front of an all-you-can-eat buffet where he could only choose between a potato chip or a

peanut. It was almost better not to eat anything at all as the choice was just too frustrating!

Realizing that Jake had finished reading, the Ancient Designer calmly observed him with an amused expression before asking him for his choice.

‘Can I take... everything?’ Jake tried shamelessly without much optimism.

‘Of course not. Only one skill is allowed.’ Xion Zolvhur chuckled with a big smile.

However, when faced with Jake’s depressed expression, the old Zhorion added,

‘That’s what I would normally say, but you’re lucky. These Oracle Skills are normally designed using my Spirit Body to provide the required raw material. Such miraculous Oracle Skills require a lot of liquid alloy and a trace of my spirit to overcome the Oracle System’s authority to such an extent. You happen to be wearing enough of it on you so that I can design at least 3, but I won’t go beyond that or your bracelet might regress and the Oracle would never tolerate such favoritism anyway.

‘Never forget that these Oracle Skills don’t really belong to you. The Oracle will turn a blind eye to give me face, but if something happens to me one day or my relationship with the Oracle deteriorates, those Skills could be taken away from you... Have I made myself clear?’

‘Crystal clear.’ Jake nodded with a serious expression.

‘Very good. Now you choose.’

In the end, after a long hesitation and excruciating mental torture, Jake relinquished his fantasies and opted for three pragmatic skills: Oracle Cloaking, Promotion and Oracle Space Storage.

All of these skills were incredibly useful, but these three were the ones that would benefit him at all times and were still affordable to activate. Once the decision was made, the Ancient Designer set to work and his Spirit Body wrapped him up, making him feel like he was trapped in a huge crystal of light.

Without really understanding what was going on, he saw the liquid alloy shifting at breakneck speed through his body in complex patterns that were impossible to decipher. Some of this liquid alloy seemed to combust on contact with Xion Zolvhur's consciousness, but there was nothing he could do to prevent it. For the present Jake, the old Zhorion was an entity as invincible as the Oracle.

His body was also screened by several of the machines inside the laboratory, but even with great focus he failed to determine their function.

Long afterwards, the Ancient Designer's consciousness withdrew from his body and he found the old man smiling in front of him.

'I left a few parting gifts in addition to the three Oracle Skills. The first one, as you can imagine, is that this discussion will remain forever unknown to the Oracle. The portion of your brain and soul containing these memories is protected by my energy. The others... you will discover them once you return to B842.'

Jake was intrigued, but he kept his doubts to himself. Instead, he thanked the old alien profusely. It didn't matter whether the Ancient Designer had a hidden agenda, these Oracle Skills were invaluable. Their growth potential was twice as great as the Oracle Skills of the same name, but their purchase price in the Oracle Store was astonishing.

Even if he had spent all of his Aether, he would never have been able to get all three Oracle Skills. He had a better understanding of why the Players

surviving to the very end of their Second Ordeal were so highly regarded. The advantage these exclusive rewards gave them was priceless.

Jake was then led back to the original hall by the Ancient Designer and found the Zhorion and Hakkrasha, who like him had thoughtful but undoubtedly satisfied faces.

Jake noticed that the Zhorion now had an Oracle Device similar to his on his wrist. Unlike the rest of his people, the alien had broken free from their curse and joined the ranks of the Oracle Players.

Upon his return, the Zhorion warrior immediately took the initiative to introduce himself. To the annoyed pout of Hakkrasha, he had done the same with him previously.

‘Ekaion. ‘The young man Zhorion introduced himself by shaking his hand without his consent.

Jake, who did not like people to enter his personal space, especially when it was another man, frowned, but he accepted the handshake, not forgetting to crush the alien’s frail hand.

‘Jake,‘ He smiled as he saw the Zhorion wince as he retrieved his hand.

‘All right, it’s time to return home. ‘The Ancient Designer said as he asked them to gather together to enter a sort of cylindrical elevator.

Once the three winners were inside the pod, the old man stared at each of them in turn with an emotional gaze before exhaling a long sigh.

‘Farewell.‘

The frail figure of Xion Zolvhur dissipated before their eyes and their vision changed abruptly as if someone had just turned off the light. The next second when Jake regained consciousness, he was back in the boundlessly dark space of the Red Cube and the Oracle System interface popped up in his mind.

The Second Ordeal was finally over.