

The Oracle Paths

Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

Chapter 349 – Interlude

Moments after the return of Jake, Hakkrasha and Ekaion, Xion Zolvhur's avatar lost his kind and benevolent smile, a placid indifference showing instead. What had not changed, however, was this sense of weariness and exhaustion.

The frail silhouette of the old Zhorion slowly levitated to another room that Jake and the other two Players hadn't been lucky enough to visit. The armored door opened automatically, letting the alien in without any issues.

A dark room full of surveillance screens and holograms bearing a strong resemblance to the inner layout of a spaceship greeted him, the dim ambient light reflecting off the old man and lending him a most eerie appearance.

Before the Ancient Designer could slouch into the only steel chair capable of supporting his weight and return to his prisoner's seclusion, a detestable voice echoed behind him.

'Xion, how much longer are you going to persist?'

It was a voice that was both deep and high-pitched, with a timbre that was equally masculine, feminine and robotic. Such a voice did not sound natural and yet it was not unpleasant. But when the old Zhorion heard it, his numbness faded instantly.

A muffled anger briefly distorted his features, drastically accentuating his wrinkles, but when he turned around, the kind and benevolent smile was back.

‘Until my last breath. ‘He replied with open scorn in his eyes, though his smile lingered on. ‘Unlike some people, I take responsibility. If my death is the price I have to pay to repent for this crime, I will gladly accept it.’

The owner of this voice was only a mass of indistinct light, the apparition hiding behind it impossible to discern. The mass of light was constantly fluctuating, sizzling like a light bulb about to die out.

Despite the inability to distinguish the slightest detail in this dazzling light, the mood of the individual concealed behind it could not have been more transparent.

‘Fool!’ The voice roared with unprecedented rage. ‘You could let go and spare yourself all this suffering! This Mirror Universe is doomed. By getting out of this cage you have built for yourself, you could save your people from such a living hell. Why sacrifice yourself for a world that doesn’t care about you? Is the Oracle really worth dying for?’

Xion Zolvhur sneered at hearing these absurd arguments for the umpteenth time.

‘Not everyone is a traitor like you. ‘ The old Zhorion finally replied, without smiling this time...

‘Hehe, that’s not what your other avatars say. Two of them were convinced by what I said today. After billions of years apart, these avatars have long since developed divergent personalities.’

‘Impossible...’ The Ancient Designer denied with a skeptical frown.

‘I may be a selfish traitor, but I won’t allow myself to lie to you about it. ‘The voice declared softly with extreme seriousness. ‘After all, I don’t have that many friends still alive. Our friendship is precious to me. If your Spirit Body were whole and at its prime, the Corruption would have no hold on you, but now... This prison force field may protect you from the Corruption and the

eyes of the Oracle, but it also cuts the spiritual link between you and your main soul. On the other hand... You know very well that nothing can impede the Corruption. Your actions are like a dam of twigs trying to stop a tsunami. Oh Xion... If you have any instinct for self-preservation, give up this madness, I implore you.'

The Ancient Designer inhaled heavily to mask his true emotion, but his response remained as firm as the previous ones.

'Never. As long as He persists, so shall I!'

'Sigh... Don't regret it. I bid you farewell my friend. Of all the avatars, you are the one who has retained the essence of the original Xion through the ages. The next time I appear before you, alas, I am afraid that the Corruption will have overcome your faith. When your main Soul will fall as well, there will only be four of us left... '

The old Zhorion was about to retort when the mass of light disappeared. The avatar became again the only presence in this dark room filled with holograms and screens. At that moment, the Ancient Designer looked as if he had suddenly aged another hundred years.

The alien slumped into his steel armchair and his consciousness unfolded again to connect simultaneously to all these holograms and screens. On these screens, many rooms identical to the one he was in were displayed in front of him. Aliens looking very much like him were sitting on other similar armchairs displaying similar but contrasting expressions.

Suddenly, on one of these screens, Xion discovered another Xion greeting two other Players to deliver their rewards. On the scale of a single Ordeal, few people would meet the Ancient Designer, but out of billions it was a recurring phenomenon.

On the basis of luck itself, it was not uncommon for a Player to be pushed into the force field by an enemy in order to be eliminated. These 'weaklings'

therefore became accidental winners. Others, more stupid, sometimes treated the force field as another Green Soul Spell to overcome.

Originally, Xion didn't always save these accidental winners, but recently he had begun to be more forgiving.

The avatar, whom he observed via the cameras installed in each prison, guided the two Players into the largest room in a manner very similar to the one he had applied to Jake, Hakkrasha and Ekaion. Normal as can be.

Bpo Xamr jfl juui fjfzu ovfo ao jmpit rmo em fl nifrut. Irtuut, ovu fsfofz md ovu mit Zvmzamr guvart ovu lhzuur fgzpnaiw efsu pn val gurusmiuro lqaiu frt fr uknzullamr md npzu qftrull taldaepzut val dfhu fl ovu fiaur iahcut val ianl.

Unimaginable spiritual pressure engulfed the two Players, compressing them to a subatomic scale in a fraction of a second. These two 'particles', corresponding to their former bodies, were then quickly absorbed by the wide-open mouth of the old Zhorion.

Immediately afterwards, the avatar vanished, leaving an empty prison behind him. Another avatar had fallen. Faced with this spectacle, the Xion Zolvhur who had welcomed Jake frowned and resumed his morbid surveillance, his cold gaze losing even more hope.

'Ruby, you're back!' An authoritative male voice echoed through a large hall filled almost exclusively with humans.

Each of these humans wore a recognizable military uniform. The color and quality of the weapons and armor changed from time to time, but the sewn pattern of the Earth on their clothing remained constant.

In the center of this hall, in the midst of all these soldiers, a huge Red Cube several hundred meters high stood in front of them emitting a scarlet radiance.

The young woman with long white hair turned towards the voice with an indescribable expression on her face. Something between the cold detachment of a snake and the panic of a young girl after being turned down by her lover. There was also guilt and anger, but to whom it was directed, it was hard to tell.

Recognizing her supervisor Alef, Ruby looked down and stood to attention. She then noticed that Craig and the others at her side had followed suit.

Like her, they were torn between different emotions. Depending on how they had died and the rewards they received, the range of emotions and their intensity could vary significantly. Nevertheless, compared to most of the other soldiers in the hall, their self-control remained relatively good.

‘Dismissed.’ The instructor said with severity after scrupulously gauging the expression of each of his subordinates. ‘Follow me.’

Instructor Alef and his associate Xiaoming guided the group of prodigies in their care to a debriefing room twenty kilometers away. Once out of the Player Hall, an armored vehicle landed in front of them and transported them within minutes to New Earth’s largest fortified base after the research center that Jake and his friends had previously visited.

All of the soldiers standing guard there were hardened Evolvers who had participated in at least four Ordeals. The death rate was horribly high after the fifth Ordeal, so very few soldiers dared to risk it and the government was reluctant to sacrifice its army unnecessarily.

On the other hand, the first four Ordeals were compulsory. With the exception of new recruits and prodigies from the civilian selective program ‘Trial Worlds’, all soldiers who had joined B842 for more than three months had completed these four basic Ordeals.

Each soldier on guard had naturally completed these formative Ordeals and their auras were violent and sharp, with their Spirit Bodies carefully monitoring every movement in their respective observation perimeters.

Seeing Alef pass in front of them with his ‘ pupils ‘, the soldier standing guard, who was almost 3 meters high because of his extreme Constitution and the influence of genetic modifications, meticulously searched them by scanning them with his mind, and then stepped aside to let them pass.

As with the New Earth Research Center, most of the base was underground. A freight elevator brought them quickly down several hundred meters underground before stopping with a shrill squeaking sound.

Alef and his prodigies, who were used to the place, crossed a few corridors and greeted a few officers as they passed by, before stopping at the so-called debriefing room. After knocking twice, they entered.

It was a small room with a long wooden table and minimalist decoration. A portrait of the current and previous presidents hung on the walls. An old general in a uniform brimming with medals sat in a leather seat at the end of the table and seemed to be expecting them. Like the guard at the entrance to the base, he was almost three meters tall and his muscles were overdeveloped.

Recognizing Alef and his recruits, he got up from his chair immediately and gave him a hug. As Alef was much smaller, the scene resembled that of an adult comforting a child. When the adult and the child were both old men, there was something wrong with it...

‘We’ll have a beer later, Eric. ‘ Alef growled as he pushed the old general away with a nudge in the plexus.

Just afterwards, the instructor’s face turned reddish purple, his elbow was in intense pain as if he had just hit an iron wall. The general chuckled with

embarrassment, but he quickly ignored his comrade's agony to take care of the recruits.

The debriefing was nothing more than an extremely brief routine procedure. Each of the young recruits under Alef's supervision connected their wristbands to General Eric's and the video and audio data from their previous Ordeal was instantly transferred to him.

Each soldier working for New Earth had a relatively flexible Servant Contract who were frequently employed to ensure the smooth functioning of the different factions. The contract contained many clauses as in a normal employee contract, with the possibility to dissolve the contract by resigning. One of these clauses obliged them to faithfully transmit these Ordeal data to their superiors.

Very quickly, the general had retrieved all the information and dismissed them. The young men and women shouted with joy and left the room immediately to finally enjoy a well-deserved rest.

Only Eric, Alef and Xiaoming stayed in the room with pensive expressions after the General had given the two men a copy of the data he had just received as well as some exclusive information about the Second Ordeal. In particular, the real solution of the last trial.

'What do you think of Ruby's report?' Eric broke the silence first. His inquisitive tone was devoid of his previous friendliness.

'It sounds authentic, but the end is fake. Several minutes seem to have disappeared from the report.' Alef affirmed with resolution.

'I think the same...' Xiaoming nodded.

'Of course it's fake, but the real question is how did she do it? Her Contract doesn't allow her to. She failed towards the end, but that's not unexpected. With her character, it's even preferable. This human who saved her, I want to know everything about him. He was still alive after Ruby robbed him. If he

survived, these are ideal circumstances to attempt a foolish act. You know what I mean... ‘

‘With these injuries and without Soul Stones, I doubt he could have survived much longer...‘ Xiaoming grumbled as he scratched his head.

‘It doesn’t matter. He and Ruby seem to know each other. ‘The general objected coldly. ‘I want to know when they met and the nature of their relationship. As low as his chances of success are, the mere fact that he was still alive at this stage without any rigorous military training or support team speaks volumes about his potential. After Ruby’s disgraceful act, such an individual might resent us, but Ruby is too important to us. If this man proves to be a danger to Ruby and the Earth Government, we will have to take appropriate action...‘ .

Alef and Xiaoming stiffened when they sensed the killing intent of the old general, but as veteran soldiers they had participated in their fair share of bloodshed. Without commenting, they acquiesced and left the room after receiving their new orders:

Identify Jake, recruit him, and if they failed to do so, make sure he would not pose any danger...