

The Oracle Paths

Volume 4: The Purgatory

Chapter 357 - Depressed Kyle

"What are you thinking about?" Will asked as he saw Jake looking up at the sky with a thoughtful expression.

"It doesn't make sense." Jake mumbled with a squint in his eyes as if it could help him better discern reality.

Meanwhile, the rumbling thunder of cannon fire and other Aether Skills continued to roar like a fireworks display. Soon other Evolvers flew above them like a multitude of shooting stars that they could barely follow with their eyes.

All of these veteran warriors far surpassed their current levels and were rushing to Thelma's borders and transportation towers as if the island was on the brink of war. Jake and Will even saw an Oracle Guardian like the one that briefed them during their Second Ordeal pass over them.

Its aura was contained, but carried as much energy as a hundred nuclear bombs. And yet, even this fearsome alien was hurtling towards the borders of Thelma as if his very dignity depended on it. Although the warrior wore a helmet, Jake could almost imagine the grim expression on his face of a soldier sent to his doom.

"What do you mean?" Will eventually picked up on Jake's reply after the flood of warriors flying past them began to wane.

Jake raised an annoyed eyebrow at the businessman's ignorance. Apparently, although intelligent, his comrade was not very good at physics.

"Does the speed of light ring a bell?"

"Of course, it's 300,000km/sec... Oh!" Will finally changed his expression as he got enlightened. "Impossible. The sky we see is fake?"

"If it was, all these soldiers wouldn't have reacted so quickly as if the situation was urgent." Jake shook his head. "But the sky can't be real either unless the laws of physics here are radically different. After he told us about these dimensional mirror games, the most likely hypothesis is that the sky we see is a real-time reconstructed image of B842. How this information arrives instantaneously despite the distance I cannot explain, but I cannot explain the Cubes technology either, nor why gravity on B842 remains normal despite the colossal mass of the planet."

Once aware of the problem, Will easily derived the various issues on his own.

"To verify your hypothesis, we would have to fly out of Thelma into the void until we crossed the kind of mirage, screen or illusion that transmits these images in real-time. But there is one thing that has always operated without considering the distance factor until now: the Oracle System. Passing through the bracelet, it should not be complicated to retranscribe the situation on B842 even if it is a reconstructed sky."

Jake agreed with this explanation. It was the most plausible. As long as both Aether and the Oracle System existed, he was willing to believe that anything was possible.

"If the surface of B842 that we see is the reality, I'm afraid the situation is more complicated than we think." Jake said out of the blue as the duo headed towards the center of Thelma. "The old alien didn't say much, but he dropped some crucial information."

"The fact that uninhabitable or unliveable environments were assembled and segregated together?" Will questioned rhetorically. "The anomaly came from this cyclonic spot that seemed to come straight out of Jupiter, didn't it? "

"The problem is not that these areas are separated, because without that we would all be dead already. It's normal that similar exoplanet environments have been connected together to maximize our chances of survival. All the aliens we've encountered so far whether they are Nosks, Krishs, Ziuids and so forth breathe oxygen like us despite the differences that divide us. That's why we meet them so often.

"No, the real problem lies with the Digestors. It has been known for a long time that these creatures can spawn from the Aether contained in the atmosphere and from anywhere. The Aether density is rising fast... Yesterday it was 21 and it's 22.5 this morning. It's getting faster and this Aether density is the same everywhere on this planet until proven otherwise."

Will did not need more clues to infer the seriousness of the situation. Both men felt extremely gloomy and pessimistic at this point.

"The Digestors spawn also in these uninhabitable areas." Will finally concluded with seriousness. "Even the vacuum of space if one follows this logic. Since they can absorb Aether for sustenance, they can proliferate everywhere, even in the absence of prey."

"And because these areas are uninhabited, no Evolver goes there to eliminate them." Jake added, looking up at the sky again in dread. "They are free to grow without any limits or interference. If B842 came into existence 20 years ago, the oldest Digestors on this planet are logically at least the same age. At the speed at which these monsters are evolving, 20 years is a very long time... "

Will shivered uncontrollably as he imagined the horrors housed in these environments assembled from hostile planets.

"Let's talk about something else..." The businessman proposed as he tried to hide his hands sweaty of trepidation. If he thought more about it he might not be able to sleep at night anymore.

"All right... Let Thelma's security do its job." Jake nodded without much conviction.

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"Where are Sarah, Kyle, and the others?" Jake tried to bring the conversation to a lighter topic.

Will, who was pale, responded with renewed enthusiasm as if this question was his lifeline.

"A little further on at the New Earth camp. "The businessman explained by pointing to a fortified base the size of a grain of sand on the horizon. The island being completely flat, it was possible to see very far with their Perception.

"Thelma is a very expensive Oracle City. It's limited in size, so the more Evolvers and Players get richer and want to move there, the more the price goes up. The Yellow Cube cost us 250 Aether points this time, but it was just over 50 points a few days earlier. With the growth of land here, I thought I could get a good deal by buying a residence in Thelma before the prices skyrocketed, but that's no longer possible. Prices are already in the tens of billions. It's not worth it for people like us. The island is growing constantly, but not as fast as I would like... "

Jake listened quietly to his friend chatting passionately about the real estate and business prospects on Thelma and picked up quite a bit of information. Will had done his homework and knew his stuff well. Some of the anecdotes and advice he gave were good to take, even though he felt he would never need them.

"... About Kyle." Will said abruptly in a warning tone. "Don't ask him how his previous Ordeal went or what he received as a reward. Sarah made that mistake yesterday and... I strongly advise against it."

Jake laughed as he understood the situation. He was indeed the only one of his comrades he had not received any news from all along his Ordeal. With his relatively fearful and cautious character, he was not at all surprised by the result.

"Don't laugh. "Will showed a helpless face. "It was still okay at first, but the fact that even Tim and the two sisters did better than him was a huge blow to his ego. Right now, he feels like shit. It's not the right time to rub it in."

Jake thought Will was overly insistent, but it was precisely because the businessman had a good understanding of his uncaring character that he took all this time to give him a heads-up.

In addition to Tim, their group consisted of three men and three women. With his pitiful performance, it wasn't surprising that Kyle felt so bad, he who was originally a popular Playboy in his university where everything worked out for him.

"How much longer are we going to walk..." Jake grumbled after a while treading on those endless metal slabs. If they had run, they would surely have arrived long ago.

"Just a little longer... We're almost there." Will reassured him with an apologetic smile.

He hadn't lied. A few kilometers further on, they found a small platform containing all kinds of Orange Cubes with signs posted in front of it going from rudimentary wooden boards to holographic screens. These seemed to have been built and placed here jointly by different civilizations.

"It is just to save a little time. "Will explained roughly as he put down his baby dragon on the floor to let it stretch. He had been holding it under his arm the whole time.

The winged dinosaur uttered a cute, excited roar and charged straight towards one of the Orange Cubes like a rabid bull at a red scarf. The Orange Cubes being free to use, the worst was to be feared.

The animal didn't have an Oracle Device and neither Jake nor Will knew if the dinosaur could use them, but it still caused a panic in Will's mind and he immediately ran after his pet.

Fortunately, this was not needed. With Jake's help, the baby dragon found himself immobilized in the air a few inches above the ground. No matter how loudly it growled and flapped its wings, it just hovered in place.

Fed up, Will picked up the animal and scolded it severely. Seeing that ridiculous scene Jake couldn't help but ask, "Why are you keeping that pet? It's a burden more than anything else."

His situation with Crunch was different. The animal was with him from the start. As for this baby dragon, Will had clearly brought it back from his previous Ordeal. No matter how one interpreted things, such a stupid baby hybrid dinosaur was extremely taxing and required constant attention.

"I've become attached to it..." Will stammered with embarrassment.

"The truth?" Jake rolled his eyes when he heard that ridiculous excuse.

"Uh... let's just say his adult form is worth it."

Jake didn't push any further. Nevertheless, faced with his indifferent silence, Will gave himself up and explained the circumstances of his encounter with this dinosaur.

Will had survived his Second Ordeal by using and abusing his charisma to tame animals. His Missions, Achievements and Quests had all been oriented in that direction. While communicating with the island's beasts under his control he had discovered an old abandoned laboratory on the island.

There he had discovered that many of the creatures swarming on the island were manufactured there. This explained their unusual and often colorful appearances. When he had tamed more than 1000 different creatures, he had obtained an identification key to enter this laboratory usually inaccessible to participants.

In the course of his exploration, he had then found out that the laboratory was not so empty. A few strange Zhorion Thralls ran the store along with a very friendly humanoid robot in a butler's outfit. Luckily, they had completely ignored him and even let him tinker with one of the machines to create the species of his choice.

The species creation system in this lab was extremely recreational with an incredible DNA library and organic resources used solely for this purpose. Even a child could create a functional species by playing with the proposed options.

Will had played the sorcerer's apprentice for a few hours until he eventually made his own dragon before being ruthlessly kicked out. The lab had then disappeared underground as if it had never existed.

According to him, if he had reached the next milestone by taming 10,000 creatures, he could have directly created an adult or an even more terrifying species. Jake made no secret of his astonishment, but judging by the almost cocky pride of his comrade, he could guess that his friend had never received any Soul Glyph, or he would have regretted dearly not having completed this series of feats till the very end.

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The place was no bigger than a soccer field and relatively dilapidated, but the security was tight despite the low probability of encountering a Digestor. Similar bases belonging to other species were sticking to theirs and this made the suburb of Thelma visually

disharmonious. Tensions between Earth's military and warriors of other species were not uncommon.

Solar panels were placed on the rooftops and a few luminous spheres reminding him of his own Aether Core were placed at the four corners of the base and powered strange elongated weapons that Jake had never seen before.

The few buildings that were erected seemed to be made of sheet metal and hastily assembled, but as Jake entered the cafeteria where Sarah and the others were waiting for them, he realized that the interior was luxuriously furnished and well equipped. However, he was shocked to see how empty the place was. Except for a few soldiers enjoying a drink or eating their rations, most of the tables were empty.

When Esya, Enya's younger sister, saw them, she waved her hand to attract their attention and the duo sat down at their table straight away. Even now, Jake still didn't know why they absolutely had to meet here.