

The Oracle Paths

Volume 4: The Purgatory

Chapter 395 - Landing

A few minutes later, Jake reached the front of the ship in the second control room. This secondary cockpit and operations center was less exposed than the initial room destroyed by the pirate invasion.

It was also much smaller. The place was designed like a bunker: narrow, austere, but very well defended. At the heart of Compartment A, this room was protected by multiple layers of armor and optimal security, but that was not all it had to offer.

The space monitoring relied entirely on the surveillance and detection systems in place. While the communications were disabled, the Titan Pearl was basically piloted blind.

The other major disadvantage was that this room was far from the hangars and rescue shuttles bordering the ship. In the event of a major incident compromising the integrity of the ship, the staff would be the least likely to escape.

"Jake, you're finally here!" Will gave him a hug and led him hurriedly inside, as if there wasn't a second to lose. Still, perceiving the vacant expression of his leader, he hesitantly asked, "Something bothering you?"

Jake shook his head and followed him as he explained shortly, "I was attacked by a Fluid Adept just before your call."

"A pirate, a Player or the saboteur?" Will inquired with an understanding frown.

"Hard to say. Probably the saboteur, but the other two possibilities are not to be excluded. Alas, they are even more likely."

Will stroked his chin silently as he tried to unravel the mystery, but he gave up almost immediately. There were too many elements missing for them at the moment.

"Did you kill him?" He then asked, remembering that Jake hadn't mentioned this major detail.

"Yes and no. I killed him physically, but his spirit escaped in the form of a Fluid Ghost. I come to wonder if this individual was not controlled from the start. Even if we identify the assassin, the trail will probably be a dead end."

"Who are you talking about?" The general's shrill voice suddenly exploded in their ears, bringing an end to their discussion.

Jake shrugged, too lazy to answer. Fortunately, Will was there to smoothen things out.

"Jake was attacked by the saboteur. At least, that's our theory. He reported it concisely, hiding nothing.

The impetuous young woman was deeply taken aback by the report.

"Where is the corpse?" She asked urgently.

A charred corpse reeking of burnt blood and barbecue popped up out of nowhere in front of them, startling Avy Shanmin backwards and drawing the attention of the other officers and Players present. Emiwan and his two loyal right-hand men also approached with undisguised curiosity.

"A Fluid Adept whose gland has been removed. Who is he?" The pirate captain asked, raising an intrigued eyebrow.

"Edmond?" The young woman said promptly.

"Let me check." The bearded officer inserted his identification key into a nearby device and the data of all the passengers quickly flashed before his eyes. With a photo of the victim, he identified him in a matter of seconds.

"Corporal Virgil Rowley, age 28, Fluid Squire. One of the people responsible for the safety of the maintenance personnel in compartment C. This is his first flight aboard the Titan Pearl, but his profile is clean. His wife and three-year-old son are among the passengers aboard the ship."

"Send a team to check on his family, but if they're not already dead they probably don't know anything." Avy Shanmin ordered immediately. She may have had a temper, but at least she knew how to take the appropriate decisions when needed.

Then she sighed heavily,

"This mess doesn't look good to me. Anyway, they wanted to get us to this station and we're finally there. For the moment, we will have to play the game of this conspiracy's instigator."

"Why did you bring me here?" Jake quickly changed the subject. This soldier's death was tragic, but he saw himself as the victim. After all, he was the one who had been ambushed for no reason.

Remembering why he had contacted Jake, Will said directly, "We found the distress beacon."

"Oh?" Jake was surprised. He didn't think it would be that simple, but on the other hand, it was absolutely not surprising. From the beginning, he had suspected that once the storm passed, the signals inside would become detectable again.

However, when he saw the confusion of the Players present, but also that of the Titan Pearl's native officers, he realized that something was wrong.

"What's the problem?"

"There's not just one emergency beacon, but 22." The handsome Player with a pale face and red eyes enlightened him with a smile.

Jake's eyes opened wide, but he picked himself up right away. It complicated things, but it wasn't a big deal. Instead of investigating a distress signal and possibly saving what could be saved, they would just have to repeat the procedure sixteen more times. It was laborious, but not necessarily more complicated considering that their Main Mission did not require them to rescue anyone.

"It's unexpected, but it doesn't make much difference. Why is my presence here necessary?" He finally asked after a few seconds of consideration.

Avy Shanmin wasn't a Player, but they could sense that these strange passengers were there for these beacons. Normally, this would have aroused her suspicion, but the situation was so serious that she could only appreciate these welcome reinforcements.

"The Titan Pearl is the 23th settler ship traveling to Riva 2," the bearded officer named Edmond took the young general's place to clarify matters. " Exactly 22 beacons were detected."

"You mean..."

"Precisely..." The veteran confirmed gloomily. "Given that the first ship left 56 years ago and the 22 beacons are still here, we'd be fools if we didn't realize we'd fallen into a trap."

"Someone high up wanted to bring us here."

Jake pondered this revelation for a long time, but ultimately he was still unsure why these soldiers trusted them so much. The fact that the ship's passengers were infested with Players should have aroused their mistrust.

Luckily, since most Players had spontaneously defended the ship during the pirate attack, most officers were willing to take that risk, or at least use them as cannon-fodders.

It was the logic of the most clueless, though. After being defeated effortlessly by Jake, Avy Shanmin and the senior officers present at least knew that if these Players wanted to eliminate them, it would be exceedingly simple.

Tvuzudmzu, mriw mru nifplagiw vwnmovulal zuqfarut. Sjuunare ovu zmmq jaov f eifrhru, ovu fglurhu md lmqu artasatpfil hmrdezqut val tmpgol.

"You don't trust the Consortium Inquisitors. "He declared coolly.

Avy and the officers present chuckled awkwardly, without even trying to deny it. Indeed, they didn't trust those Consortium dogs. Even for a Player like him who disdained plotting or playing politics, he could perfectly well imagine who was making the high-stakes decisions.

Ultimately, the Third Brotherhood was part of the Galactic Consortium and was therefore acting on its behalf.

He had other questions to ask, but regrettably he was not given the opportunity to do so. A soldier suddenly emerged panting from the cockpit in the adjacent room and after a quick military salute, he shouted bluntly, "Yotai Shien 3 is in sight. Landing imminent."

"So it began..." The bearded officer sighed with disappointment.

For Jake, it was a mysterious comment, but for the Players who had attended the earlier meetings it was crystal clear: The order to land directly on the space station had never been given.

Over the previous days, the maintenance personnel had realized that the sabotage of communications had only served as a cover for a more ambitious tampering. A virus that could not be purged had somehow corrupted their system.

A flight plan that could not be cancelled had been programmed without their knowledge and they could do nothing to cancel it. Even after all their efforts, they weren't sure if they were really in control of the ship.

Avy Shanmin was quick to inform the passengers, doing her best to keep them calm, urging them to take advantage of the ship's various services and entertainment for the umpteenth time in a few hours.

As for the Players present, they contacted the non-attending members of their faction and asked them to proceed to the disembarkation hangar. Jake did the same, and a few minutes later, he was standing with Will at one of the hangar's balustrades. All of his comrades were at his side.

During the landing maneuver, the Titan Pearl trembled several times, making rustling, gearing, and gassing noises.

As the ship approached the station of which they didn't even have an overview, Jake, whose premonitory instincts had been magnified by the advancement of his Fluid Core, felt a maelstrom of danger and negativity pervading them.

This was one of the Fluid's drawbacks. Imbued with the emotions and *désirés* of every lifeform connected to it, this energy was not really neutral. It was easy to be affected. The more powerful a Fluid Wielder was, the greater the danger. In comparison, a normal person would probably not have felt anything special.

The Aether was not that different, but still much more neutral. Common terms like "killing intent" or "murdering aura" were vague and impalpable, but very real. Spirit Body fluctuations could actually affect the Aether and individuals in close proximity with the proper techniques and attributes. Except that with the Fluid, these factors were magnified and much harder to suppress.

At last, moments later, a thud resounded in the landing shed, shaking the entire Pearl Titan. They had arrived on Yotai Shien 3.