

The Oracle Paths

- Chapter 1099: It's Going To Cost Me Dearly Again |

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Thanks to his new Lumyst Breath ability, Jake could now clearly sense that what he thought was vital energy wasn't. No amount of lifeforce could cause such profound rearrangements, let alone enable him to transcend his limits with a mere 50% success rate.

From what he gathered from his Breath of Living Elements ability, it was also a form of Lumyst, but with life and some kind of holy light dual attributes. If his perception was correct, pure Lumyst was attributeless.

This, however, explained why those Light Warriors and Lifemancers all developed similar powers. If it was the main resource for their cultivation, it made a lot of sense.

In fact, Jake could also infer that the spectral energy of the Duskwight Lands was another form of Lumyst. And if surviving three baptisms was required to deeply remodel one's organism internally through a Lumyst Breath Grace, no wonder Lifemancers and Soulancers needed to endure at least that many enchantments to be recognized as such.

Without that +3, they could have the most dazzling Lumyst Aura, but their bodies and spirits would never really adapt to all the accumulated Lumyst. At best, they would inactively gain some control over it as their bodies and minds were constantly washed over and nourished by contact with Lumyst.

In the end, these natives weren't similar to the other Players and him. Regular exposure to fire wouldn't immunize you, let alone tame it. At best, you would just end up getting burned.

Of course, unlike fire, Lumyst Water had a nutritive component, either for the flesh or the spirit. In the very long term, and if they persevered long enough for luck to smile upon them, an ordinary native could still obtain abilities and strength comparable to cultivating their Lumyst Aura with Lumyst Breath.

For all that, they didn't start from zero either. The Underworld Barbarian race, for example, was living proof of such adaptive evolution over a very long time. They could cultivate their Spirit Lumyst Aura, although it was not without challenges.

It was just much more difficult. Like embarking on a world tour on foot to reach a destination that was just 5 meters behind us. He was barely exaggerating.

As Jake inferred all sorts of theories and assumptions based on his feedback and observations, he continued swimming up the Lumyst River without deviating from his course, the immense tree of light and the roaring cascade becoming his beacon of Alexandria to navigate the darkness. Concurrently, the purity of the water continued to grow, subjecting him to increasingly perilous forced enchantment attempts on his organism in case of failure.

+10, +11, +12, +13... At the fourteenth baptism, Jake suddenly froze, a cloud of blood exploding from his body. The bloody cloud expanded rapidly, completely shrouding Jake inside, his condition unknown.

Just when it seemed he had perished, the chaotically expanding blood cloud stopped diluting and suddenly began to condense. A whirlwind of crimson liquid ablaze with an inner fire then erupted out of nowhere at the bottom of the river, crackling upon contact with the highly purified surrounding Lumyst Water.

Most disintegrated upon contact with the water, having failed to withstand the failure of this fourteenth enchantment, but half of it started glowing a deeper red, reminiscent of a scarlet sun. Then the whirlwind contracted as suddenly as it had appeared, revealing Jake's naked but intact silhouette a moment later.

His face had an even healthier glow than before, if that was possible, but his expression couldn't have been uglier.

'Haha, even knowing what to expect, I almost died,' Jake grimaced wryly. 'That was a close call. The next one could very well kill me if I fail.'

He had enough biomass to try again several times, but considering his difficulties accessing his Inner Space with an intact body, he preferred not to risk it. A fifty-fifty chance of success seemed reasonable, but he wasn't desperate enough to take the plunge yet.

He initially thought his high luck would suffice to cheat, but while it had worked wonders during his first baptisms, he now realized its impact was becoming increasingly minimal on the later ones. Not that it didn't exist, but clearly his luck wasn't supernatural enough to twist fate when such complex Aether laws and amounts of energy were involved.

Perhaps only Ulfar and a few other Players able of intentionally manipulating their luck could still guarantee the success of a fifteenth baptism.

"Then, I need to find a way to collect the water to study it," Jake decided resignedly.

Coincidence or not, he had come to the same conclusion as the three Rank 17 Players fighting for the Lustra Plains. Only the method differed.

Shadrex had relied on his Shadow Guide and his own gifts of foresight to locate and steal the Chalice of Nethershade they would need, while Jake had just decided to procure an substitute artifact after experiencing firsthand that he couldn't do without.

Just thinking about it, his eyes widened in realization. Their enemies had a functioning Oracle System, so it was clear they must have come to the same conclusion long before him. Heck, they didn't even have to reach the same conclusion, just trust their Oracle Paths!

Once more in a few minutes, Jake hesitated to turn back to capture an enemy Player to force them to use their bracelet to get the information he wanted.

[... There's still the Mirror World option. Whatever the state of our Aether Network, or whatever's happening here, it should work.] Xi suggested, breaking her silence. She just couldn't stay mad at him for long. That was just the kind of person she was.

Jake instinctively rejected this solution before finally reconsidering it more seriously. Of course, he had thought about it, but it wasn't without risks. Unlike the Oracle System, the Mirror World was a higher-level virtual world that could only be accessed in person, at least psychically.

The main downside was obviously being vulnerable during the process, which was not without danger. Even Jake wasn't keen on the idea in such an environment.

The other snag was that in the context of an Ordeal involving several Mirror Universes, there were inevitably agreements negotiated between their respective Oracles and the High Oracle that inevitably applied to Players with access to the Mirror World for fairness' sake.

Jake had confirmed the existence of these limitations during his brief occasional connections since the start of the Ordeal when he deemed himself in a safe place. In its current state, the Mirror World was almost useless. At least when it concerned their Ordeal.

For instance, the concept of Oracle Paths existed in the Mirror World, but it wasn't a free service. In fact, it was so fucking costly that formulating a single wish would probably leave him bankrupt.

But make no mistakes, it did have its benefits. First, it worked!

Another advantage was that only a handful of Oracle Knights could use it. Since he now knew for sure that the enemy camp had 3 in their ranks, that made 6 Players in total with access.

If Jake played his cards right, he could easily contact these Oracle Knights through the Mirror World, although that implied they were also connected at that time. On the other hand, leaving them a message shouldn't be a problem, not that he had any intention of contacting anyone.

Since seeking information related to the Ordeal was apparently prohibited, it was obviously not what Xi was referring to. Jake stumbled for a moment before grasping what she was suggesting.

'Ah, you want me to broaden the search?' He finally understood.

[Bingo.]

Seeking information related to Twyluxia, Lumyst, and anything closely or remotely related was obviously impossible. But if those search criteria became even vaguer, and the method of accessing the desired information even more indirect, then maybe they could get something.

For example, the description of the Chalice of Nethershade replica mentioned an order of cosmic monks who had mastered the duality of life and spirit. There might be some info to scrape from that angle.

They could also broaden the search on the theme of enchantment in all its forms, including artifacts and techniques able of containing/manipulating a resource with such properties affecting the container itself.

'It's going to cost me dearly again, I feel it,' Jake sighed bitterly.

Any transaction was made in Aether Stones in the Mirror World, meaning at least Grade 6 Aether Crystals. If he wanted to bypass the rules applying to the Ordeal, he would probably have to visit one of these cosmic monks in person; or someone that might know about them. Don't forget that the Mirror World was an exact copy of the real world, but fortunately, moving around it was much easier, though not cheap either.

But Xi had a good point. To find out what was wrong with their Oracle System, Jake would have no choice but to visit someone able of answering him. Without thinking, at least two names came to mind: Xion Zolvhur and Vexa.

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Xion Zolvhur, obviously, because he was the only Ancient Designer Jake currently had any relationship with, his essence having enabled Xi to escape from the Oracle System. Vexa, because he was a distant descendant of Aas.

The Cube Ancient Designer was supposed to cover all costs related to the Ordeals, and the Oracle System's recurring malfunction since the start made it the prime suspect, besides the Digestors of course. Or at least, the first one Jake needed to seek advice from about this matter.

Alas, Jake hadn't yet reached a level of power or fame where he felt entitled to meet an Ancient Designer just because there was a 'minor incident' in one of the billions and billions of Ordeals involving their Mirror Universes each day. Even meeting an Oracle Overseer was probably above his pay grade.

Which brought Vexa as the second choice.

'Anyway, I've got a mission to finish first,' Jake refocused, veering sharply towards the nearest shore instead of continuing to swim.

Since bathing in these increasingly pure Lumyst Waters was becoming mortally dangerous even for him, he could only reluctantly resort to walking on his own feet. Anyway, the Heaven Cascade wasn't far off now.

The towering light tree standing just ahead, which Jake presumed to be Anthace, the Tree of Life, told him he was in the right place. If he had any doubts left, he could also make out with his acute vision the outlines of tall white stone buildings sprawling like weeds around the gigantic trunk.

These stone buildings were quite scarce, though, as most of the structures seemed to be carved directly from immense blocks of wood. The colors of these woods varied, but their diffuse glow undeniably echoed the giant tree covering them with its canopy.

Still... Wasn't the nighttime lighting of this city a bit too conspicuous? A modern metropolitan city lit up with electricity without energy-saving concerns could hardly do better. It was only upon squinting more meticulously that he realized they were probably flames.

Against all odds, the prosperous city was under attack. Someone had beaten him to it.

"That must be Lustris City," Jake muttered as he emerged from the water, remembering what he had seen in the memories of one of the natives he had soulsearched.

The fact that other Players had come here before him didn't worry him at all. If they had found what he was looking for before him, even better.

Lustris was the official capital of the Lustra Plains and where the undisputed Radiant Conclave ruled over their half of the continent. The tallest white tower covered in stained glass, seemingly embedded and intertwined directly with and by Anthace's trunk, was probably their command center.

The trunk hid a good part of it, but from his angle - the Lumyst River passing to the south of Lustris - he could see that these stained glass windows faced east, towards the Heaven Cascade. Probably another megalomaniacal whim of these leaders to always have their eyes on their most precious golden goose.

"Let's finish this," Jake averted his gaze from the magnificent tree and dragged himself out of the water without further delay. It would be a shame if he arrived too late.

The timing was perfect, because the moment he finally got to dry land, a huge tentacle broke the calm surface of the river, trying to pull him back under. The blood from his fourteenth baptism that had nearly gone awry must have attracted the marine predator.

Unsurprisingly, the monster was huge, the overwhelming life force choking the air in his chest. Jake would normally have ignored it now that he was out of the water, but his eyes narrowed darkly upon recognizing a clump of black fur clinging to one of its suckers.

That detail alone wouldn't have alerted him, but broken orange feathers, glowing faintly like cooling embers, also littered the large tentacle beside the tufts of dark hair.

"Crunch and the turkey," Jake's expression darkened as he identified the signs. He could easily imagine what these two idiots had come here to do and how it had ended.

Don't tell me Lustris is on fire because of them? He suddenly had a bad feeling.

But at that moment, he thought of another possibility and turned back to the flailing tentacle retreating fruitlessly into the depths of the river from whence it came. Holding his breath, his face contorted hideously, and he cursed,

"No, knowing them, they got eaten during a botched baptism after aiming too high for themselves."

That was so their style! And the thing to which this tentacle belonged was covered in clues betraying its participation to the crime. What's more... It was strong enough.

"Another Titan. Great," Jake ruminated, re-entering the river he had barely left.

Whether it was Meribelle's info or that of other natives soulsearched, they only mentioned three: Anthace, Dreadnought, and Featherfall.

Obviously, their information was incomplete. In addition to the owner of this tentacle, Jake discerned, if he focused a bit, a silhouette suspiciously resembling a crab. If he could see it from this distance, it must be big...

[What? Even in the Duskwight Lands, I doubt Bones, Chillmire, and Ledger are the only Abyssal Revenants.] Xi mocked teasingly. [They're just the ones affiliated with the Dusken Throne.]

"..."

Rather than snapping back, Jake was too busy pondering on whether he should face a Titan so close to his goal just to save his cat and a damn noisy turkey. This was ABSOLUTELY not part of the plan.

"Tch, even when they're not around, they manage to piss me off." After a brief introspection, Jake eventually let out a deep, resigned sigh. Bring it on!

As soon as he made his decision, Jake struck like lightning, grabbing the end of the tentacle with both hands just before it fully retracted under the water. Before the invertebrate's reflexes kicked in, he flexed his muscles and with a twist of his hips, flung it into a cliff behind him, completely yanking it out of its natural environment from where it was prowling.

The nearly 500-meter-high cliffside was completely smashed, along with hundreds of trees and shrubs in the path of the giant octopus. He decided to call it that for lack of a better term.

In truth, it was much uglier. And scarier.

Jake then took the opportunity to take in the enormity of the freakish cephalopod's body he had just fished out and couldn't help but gasp at the sight. It wasn't every day you saw an octopus several kilometers long washed up on the shore.

Seeing the opening behind the tentacles dilate and contract painfully as if the monster was struggling to breathe, Jake questioned,

"Hey, what do you think, Xi? Do you think it's going to asphyxiate just like that? A bit disappointing for my first fight with a Titan, but I'm not complaining."

[Don't get your hopes up too high...] Xi didn't share his optimism. Gill or not, we're talking about a super creature.

Unfortunately, what followed proved her right. Struggling, the cephalopod managed to turn around and began miserably crawling towards the river. But without a skeleton or water to support its mass, the creature had clearly seen better days.

Bad luck for it, Jake wasn't the type to spare a monster that tried to eat him, let alone devour his cat. Nonetheless, before he tired himself out for nothing, he first scanned the muscular sac containing the creature's organs with his Cosmic Sight.

"Ugh..." Jake rolled his eyes with an 'as expected but not happy about it' face soon after isolating two grotesque, but definitely familiar figures in its stomach.

A cat and a bird in their normal size, or at least what they might have looked like if they weren't covered in tumors and purulent growths, were serenely awaiting their end, too paralyzed to move. Lord Phoenix seemed confident he could rise from his ashes given the chance to reach the cephalopod's sphincter, but who knew how long that would take...

Crunch was far less optimistic than his immortal companion, mourning the loss of his silky fur due to the gastric acid slowly digesting them. That bastard octopus had gobbled them up at the worst possible moment, during a Life Enchantment gone wrong after they had bitten off more than they could chew.

At first, everything went smoothly, the first successful baptisms giving them a shot of dopamine. Naturally, this prompted them to renew their bathing further east until the inevitable happened. Somewhere around their eleventh enchantment, it failed, with the known consequences for their health.

They only owed their survival to the help of the Cosmic D Starfeyrves Body Passive. The damage to their DNA had been catastrophic, but nothing this power of adaptation couldn't repair.

Regrettably, to their great dismay, it had to be that this opportunistic Titan was attracted by the smell of their scorching failure and before their regeneration kicked in, they found themselves at the bottom of its stomach. Even there, they hadn't lost hope, confident they could carve their way out once their wounds healed, but they underestimated this monster.

This damn octopus was much stronger than them. The gastric acid they were unwillingly soaking in was dissolving them much faster than their healing powers could withstand.

Without Jake's fortuitous arrival, they would surely have ended up as octopus poop within the next few minutes...