

The Oracle Paths

Volume 4: The Purgatory

Chapter 376 - First Friend

'Something's off.' Jake said mentally to his Oracle AI with a frown.

[Everything is wrong.] Xi stated calmly. [The Aether around us, can you feel it?]

'Of cour-'

Jake paused abruptly and closed his eyes. After a while he reopened them and with a puzzled face he honestly admitted the truth,

'I can't. I do perceive a small amount of Aether, but it is insignificant. Unreasonably small compared to the Aether density of this world. But instead..."

Jake briefly closed his eyes again and concentrated on his feelings.

'I feel a different kind of energy. Although it's just an impression, the air feels thick and viscous, like a...'

[Fluid?]

'Exactly!' Jake exclaimed excitedly, touching on what was bothering him.

Having identified the problem, he examined his Body Status minutely and soon discovered that his body possessed a new centimeter long organ that looked more or less like an unopened mussel. The organ was located between his eyes, just behind the glabella.

Jake also discovered a new circulatory system in addition to the blood and lymphatic system passing through this organ and running throughout the rest of the body. This organ allowed him to perceive, absorb and control this Fluid to a certain extent.

But at that very moment, this organ seemed very sluggish and useless. The Fluid seeped into this sensory organ at a trickle, and then stagnated a few centimeters of it like the blood in an artery with a stopped heart.

For the moment, Jake didn't know what he could do with this energy or how it affected him, but he was relieved to discover that it didn't affect the functioning of his Aether Core. The Aether Core indiscriminately sucked in Aether and Fluid, compressing both entities to the point where it became pure Aether again.

With this mystery solved, he felt more relaxed, but there was still something that was bothering him. Fully awake and more vigilant this time, he inspected his Oracle Status in detail and found the source of his uneasiness, or rather well being: He was too light.

It was a thought that should have plagued him from the moment he arrived. How could he stand in such gravity when his body contained 27 tons of liquid alloy? The answer was simple: This liquid alloy had been removed from him.

'Where did it go?' Jake suddenly began to panic. If the liquid alloy had been permanently removed, it would be a loss he would not recover from anytime soon.

[Calm down.] The soothing voice of Xi immediately placated him. [I know how much you hate the Oracle, but the Ordeals are fair and impartial. Without this precaution, you might not be dead, but you wouldn't have been able to move without telekinesis. The hypersleep capsule would also not have supported your weight. Look at your Space Storage.]

Listening to Xi, Jake checked the Space Storage and found all his liquid alloy floating in a corner.

[As soon as you find a place away from the cameras reabsorb the liquid alloy you think you can comfortably carry.]

Jake nodded with an indifferent expression and walked off with an even step. A door a few meters in front of him had just creaked and he had to play his part.

"Is there anyone there? I don't have enough strength to push that door." A weary female voice echoed across that door.

Jake stopped in front of that door ajar and reached out to his Aether Core to prepare for any eventuality. Finally, when the woman cried out for help for the third time, he opened the door wide with one hand.

A woman in her late 40s wearing thick glasses appeared in front of him. In addition to her pissed-off hair, she was wearing a cheap jogging suit, a pair of flip-flops with thick socks, and a long hooded sweater. Her hands were scaly and her nails were worn down. It couldn't have been more corny.

At a glance, he knew she was not a Player. Even to perfect a disguise no participant would have adopted such a look. In addition to not being ideal for fighting, it would complicate social interactions.

In addition, she wore a badge around her neck, identifying her as a member of the ship's maintenance staff. A mechanic.

"Oh, thank God! Praise the Fluid. I thought that door would never open..."

Jake felt his impatience fade as he heard her incessant whining, but he managed to put on a friendly poker face, the only expression he mastered perfectly.

"You don't have to thank me, it was the least I could do... Minerva." He took the opportunity to place one when she caught her breath. Minerva was the first name on her name tag.

Having finally managed to regain control, he took the opportunity to learn more about this ship and the reason for this trip. It was not easy, because he had to bring these questions in a natural way and not to invoke suspicion by ignoring what everyone was supposed to know.

Luckily, this lady loved to hear her voice while memory lapses and cognitive dissonance problems were frequent side symptoms after a hypersleep awakening. His questions didn't raise any suspicion.

He learned that Riva was indeed a dying planet. Its resources had been completely exploited and a recent war against the enemies of the Galactic Consortium had made its atmosphere unbreathable and highly radioactive. Its population had survived by sheltering in underground cities, but there wasn't enough for everyone.

Colonization had already begun en masse and the Titan Pearl was transporting the 23rd wave of settlers to Riva 2, their new planet. The lucky settlers were chosen by a worldwide lottery and Riva 2 was presented to them as a paradise destination where anything was possible.

In practice, nobody knew anything about this new planet. From Jake's point of view, all this propaganda had no other purpose than to give these doomed survivors a slim hope.

As everywhere where wealth and poverty mingled, injustices were legion. Since these lottery tickets had no name, just a number, a good part of them were bought at a high price by wealthy Rivans or even simply forcibly taken away in total impunity from the lucky chosen ones unable to defend them.

Moreover, half of these tickets were reserved for qualified personnel of the Third Brotherhood and their families. Of the 80,000 people aboard the Titan Pearl, only 10,000 were either part of the crew or had special qualifications. 60,000 passengers were family members or had redeemed these tickets and only the last 10,000 passengers were the actual winners of this lottery.

"I lived in District 2 of Vijindai and you?" Minerva inquired suddenly in an excited tone, taking him by surprise.

"District 5..." Jake answered awkwardly.

He wasn't lying. It was written on his identity papers.

"Oh, what a small world! I can't believe we've never met before. Because of the air pollution, there are only 10,000 survivors at Vijindai and most of them are either dead or on their way to Riva 2. If we hadn't been on that ship we would never have met, because we would have died haha... Sob! "

The middle-aged woman started crying without any warning signs.

'Fuck, please don't do that...' Jake cursed her inwardly. He hated this kind of situation.

Apart from patting her on the back to comfort her, he didn't know what else to do. On top of that, her sweater smelled weird and where he had put his hand he spotted a pile of suspicious-looking white particles: dandruff.

Jake immediately stopped comforting her and vigorously shook his hand before quietly wiping it against the nearest wall. Fortunately, fate seemed to have taken pity on him, for a door opened at the same moment.

A bearded old man in his sixties raised his arms in the air to stretch out and yawned unrestrainedly, thinking he was alone before noticing their presence.

"Minerva! How are you doing? Already awake?" The old man gave the depressed lady a bear hug and Jake took the opportunity to outrun them.

A duj hmzzatmzl frt uiusfomzl ifouz, Jfcu zufhvut f vpeu zuduhomzw. Rprrare, vu hmpit vfsu qftu ao vuzu ar f duj luhmrtl, gpo om fnnufz rmzqfi vu vft ozaut om jfic limjiw, laqifoare ovu oazut efao frt gujaituzquro uknuhout dzmq f nllureuz.

He was not alone in the dining hall. A few stainless steel tables were already occupied and a deadly silence reigned in the room. As he entered, a few curious glances turned towards him but they quickly lost interest in him and concentrated on the food in front of them.

These people were of all ages and their clothing styles were diverse and varied, sometimes similar to Earth fashion, sometimes completely different. At one of the tables in a corner, Jake saw 8 individuals wearing long black coats with hooded faces. Each of them had one to six metal tubes of various sizes and lengths on their belts.

Even while eating, these passengers wore thin leather gauntlets, reinforced with thin metal plates, and flexible armor as dark as night. At least that was the impression he got. Under their hoods, these individuals seemed to have no faces and the food seemed to vanish inside.

Feeling the insistence of his gaze, one of them raised his head in his direction and he experienced a violent shudder, as if his soul had just been laid bare in front of death itself.

The wearer of the faceless hood stared at him intensely for what seemed like an endless amount of time, then nodded his head and began to eat silently again. Only then did Jake realize that he was sweating profusely.

How scary...

Shaking his head clear, he moved towards the machine where several passengers seemed to be lining up. Seeing the person near the machine leave with a meal tray, he knew he had come to the right place.

As he joined the line, Jake's gaze continued to involuntarily linger on the hooded individuals feasting in silence and this did not fail to attract the attention of the passenger who had lined up behind him.

It was a skinny, pale young man with short black hair. Despite his sickly complexion, he was wearing white shirt and pants of good quality.

"The Consortium Inquisitors. This is the first time I've seen them in person." The young man commented with caution. "Normally, if they appear, it is because something serious is going on. Each of their appearances is always accompanied by its share of inexplicable deaths.

"What exactly are they?" Jake asked as he kept an eye on the new passengers arriving in the dining hall.

"Some say they are demons, monsters hiding under a human guise. Others say they are Fluid Manipulators who have gone wrong. Finally, some say that they are simply protecting their identity by hiding their faces with one of their tricks. In any case, they are the Consortium's lapdogs. It's best to avoid them."

"I see..."

"I'm Hade." The young man suddenly held out his hand.

"Jake," he shook hands without batting an eyelid.

He had been awake for less than an hour and had already made a friend. His social skills had finally risen to the next level. It was about time.