

The Oracle Paths

Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

Chapter 230 - Open Water

[Welcome to the Sanctuary Bubble. The first trial will begin shortly.]

[5... 4... 3... 2...1...0]

[Simulation begins.]

After plunging into the bubble with a surface reminiscent of liquid mercury, he found an infinitely dark space where all his physical sensations disappeared in favour of an inexplicable quietude. He could have stayed there until the end of time without feeling the slightest boredom or frustration.

Except that unlike the nothingness inside the Red Cube, which gave him plenty of time to regain his senses, while giving him the opportunity to chat with Xi, this Sanctuary Bubble gave him no respite.

Less than a second after entering this pitch black space, a different notification from the Oracle System had popped up immediately in his mind. It was indeed different, since an artificial voice speaking in Oraclean resonated in his skull. Compared to the Oracle System's notifications, which were rather instinctive, the message was instantly delivered with no apparent reading effort.

At the same time, before he could understand where he was and what was expected of him, he received another notification, this time from his Oracle System, informing him that he had completed the Ordeal's main mission and that he was free to leave at any time.

[Main Mission: Enter the Sanctuary Bubble: Perfect rating!]

The Hell ? It was so ridiculous that Jake felt confused for a short while. During that brief moment when he was trying to adjust to the absurdity of the situation, the countdown from the artificial voice of the Sanctuary Bubble reached zero, and he felt his mind getting sucked into some kind of irrepressible spiritual vortex.

In spite of the darkness, his spirit experienced an unpleasant sensation of compression, then distortion, followed by that of being centrifuged at a speed close to that of light. If he could still feel his body, he would probably have already vomited all his breakfast!

As his mind was played with as if he had just been thrown into a washing machine running on full power, the dizziness and twirl that paralysed his consciousness suddenly came to an end.

Suddenly he regained the feeling of his body, first his arms, then his legs, and he felt the wind caressing his skin. When he opened his eyes, he saw a beautiful azure blue sky, devoid of any clouds, and the blinding rays of the sun struck his retina.

Fuuiare iacu vu jfl nipqquoare, frt duuiare rm ezmprt fefarlo val duuo, vu immcut gurufov vaq frt lfj f qfl md zuloiull jfouz tzfjare tfreuzmpliw himlu om vaq. Budmzu vu hmpit arouznzuo frwovare, vu vao ovu jfouz qfl vufaiw, iadoare f euwluz md dmfq.

SPLASH!

With his mouth open, he reacted too late and a glassful of salt water flushed down his esophagus, ending up directly in his stomach. With his inertia, his body had sunk deep under the water and he hurried to the surface so he could spit out all that water, otherwise he would choke. Some of the water had ended up in his windpipe and his lungs were burning horribly.

When his head came to the surface, he coughed with all his strength, spitting out some of the sea water that had been swallowed through his nose and mouth. He wheezed and gasped a few times to calm down and catch his breath. Fortunately, with his Constitution and his present Vitality it took only a few seconds.

With his composure restored, Jake was finally able to inspect the spot where he had just landed.

The ocean was as far as the eye could see, except in one direction. The water was rather choppy, as if a storm had been blowing in the distance earlier and waves several meters high were pounding his body in all directions, preventing him from having a clear idea of his surroundings.

Still, he noticed that the water around him was littered with debris, whether it was dead algae, wooden planks or other objects and components of all kinds that might have belonged to a boat. The boat had probably sunk to the bottom because of the storm, and Jake could see sinister rocky reefs nearby that supported his theory.

This Sanctuary Bubble seemed to imply that he was one of the survivors of a shipwreck. Unfortunately, he didn't have much on him other than a pair of torn shorts and a tight black shirt in shreds. It seemed that this first trial was not intended to do him any favours.

Every once in a while he would get bumped by a piece of debris, but he didn't worry about it. What worried him more was the difficulty he had in breathing and swimming, despite his stats. It was as if the Aether was no longer the only component with a density of 40, but that gravity, atmospheric pressure and temperatures had also increased fourfold.

Even his mind seemed slower and more sluggish than it should be, as if the surrounding Aether was putting pressure on him. Upon

reflection, he realized that his body was being affected, but in proportion to his stats.

Ir fr ursazmrquro jvuzu ovu Auovuz turlaow jfl 10, val Auovuz lofol md qmzu mz iull 100 qftu vaq our oaql lozmreuz ovfr rmzqfi, gpo fo f turlaow md 40 ovu zfoam tzmnut om 2.5. Waov val Mwzovfzaf Bmtw vu jfl loaii dfz lpnuzamz om f rmzqfi vpqfr, gpo ovu hvfreu jfl fgzpnno urmpev om qfcu vaq duui ovu tadduzurhu.

It was all the more noticeable for his mental faculties. He had already experienced this feeling of being mentally nerfed during his First Ordeal and he originally hoped to never experience this again.

Focusing his mind, he tried to control his Spirit Body to resist this inexplicable pressure that was engulfing his spirit without consulting him. When he actively deployed his consciousness to resist this invisible oppression, he felt his mental faculties returning to him, but extending his Spirit Body in this way was no easy task.

It was like doing the plank or the chair in a core strength session. Easy to hold for a few minutes, but excruciatingly painful beyond that. If he didn't have a Spirit Body thrice stronger compared to a normal human, this effort would have been extremely difficult to maintain.

In full possession of his mental capacity, Jake finally turned his attention in the one direction where the ocean was out of his sight. A gigantic green island, perhaps as large as a continent stretched as far as the eye could see in front of him.

White sandy beaches, trees highly similar to palm or coconut trees, followed further on by an infinite lush jungle. Further still, mountain ranges covered the horizon, their snow-covered peaks disappearing into the few clouds. Some of these mountains were more than ten

kilometers high, a landscape absolutely impossible to contemplate on Earth.

Not being senile, Jake understood that he was naturally expected to swim all the way to the island in question. After all, swimming stupidly out to the ocean when there was a beach nearby would be the epitome of stupidity and a waste of his brains.

During this brief moment of pondering, which lasted only about fifteen seconds altogether, debris from the supposed wreckage had continued to collide with him while he was not paying attention to it, but all of a sudden a sharp pain brought him back to reality.

Not having forgotten that more than 90% of the participants failed in the first 5 minutes, Jake didn't relax for a single moment and yet he didn't see anything coming. In a state of alertness, he scanned the murky water around him with vigilance, but the swirling waves and the depth of the sea floor made the contents of the water indistinguishable. Even with his present perception, he could barely make out the toes of his feet.

However, from what little he could see, his blood had begun to mix with the sea water and the bloody mark of a nasty bite about a few centimeters in size was apparent on his calf. With his flexibility, he could easily contort himself to observe any part of his body.

'This?!' He gasped.

In turbulent, murky water covered with dead algae and debris, he had just been bitten by something and the bite was quite deep. Even with the robustness of his body, he couldn't stop the creature's fangs.

When he became aware of the situation, his blood froze, and a sudden panic broke out in him, which he quickly suppressed. However, he took action decisively to get out of this trap.

Performing his best front crawl, Jake's athletic body began to split the surface of the ocean at the speed of a large sailboat with the wind behind it and headed towards the island. Despite the fact that he had just broken the Earth swimming world record, his heart was beating faster and faster as he had a very bad premonition.

Turning his head behind him out of an instinct for caution, he saw a fin, piercing the surface of the water a few dozen metres behind him, and about 150 centimetres high and one metre wide. The dorsal fin had a beautiful silvery blue colour and seemed extremely smooth and hydrodynamic.

This fin was advancing in his direction at a speed comparable to that of an underwater torpedo.

'F-Fuck!'