

The Oracle Paths

Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

Chapter 232 - Nightmare

GASP!

When Jake regained consciousness, he felt the càrèss of the wind and the brightness of the sun imprinting his retina behind his closed eyelids. He couldn't feel any ground under his feet.

'A dream? Shouldn't I be dead?'

Confused, it was his only coherent thought when he opened his eyes. Despite clear memories of his last minutes of life, he could bàrèly tell the difference between dream and reality.

However, his face stiffened and paled drastically when he recognized the place where he was. An azure blue sky without clouds, a bright yellow sun, the ocean as far as the eye could see except for a giant island less than a kilometer away.

SPLASH!

Just when he realized the horror of his situation, Jake crashed into the water like a meteor, lifting a geyser of foam as he landed.

Perhaps because he had experienced this scene before, he reacted quickly this time, not forgetting to cover his nose and take a quick breath of oxygen before his big dive.

Not having swallowed sea water this time, he swam cautiously to the surface without losing his wits. Once again in contact with the fresh air of the ocean, Jake still had to deal with the same choppy waters

and the wreckage that was cluttering up the area. With the responsible reefs nearby and the murky water, this watery space was simply unnavigable.

When the current caused a dead algae to stick to his leg, Jake shrieked in fright, swimming at full speed as if he had just returned to that nightmarish jellyfish school.

When the trauma of his previous death had resurfaced, reawakening his fear that was just beginning to subside, he suddenly felt a kind of call inside him.

This mental voice was insidious and terribly tempting, offering him the possibility of leaving this hell with a single thought. All he had to do was close his eyes in the hope that everything would stop and he was absolutely certain that he would be able to leave this hell with a single thought.

It was a feeling as malicious as that of a student trying to do his homework when he had his favourite smartphone or game console in his field of vision. Even if he was determined to do so, it was a distraction that was hard to ignore, and once it existed, it would trot in a corner of his head forever.

A second insidious voice also kept reminding him that he had already completed his second Ordeal. The main mission had been cleared with a perfect rating as soon as he had entered this Sanctuary Bubble. He was free to leave at any time! He had already accomplished his mission.

Even the synthetic voice of the Sanctuary Bubble resounded in his mind, asking him for the umpteenth time if he wanted to ‘carry on’.

While he was swimming his best crawl to escape the area of the shipwreck and the ocean currents, these thoughts were ruminating inside him tirelessly, eroding his will and courage. The trauma of his

death was still extremely fresh and a visceral fear prevented him from reasoning as he used to.

But as Jake swam with renewed strength, other emotions arose within him and he began to regain his normal state of mind. Yes, he could give up at any time, but in this case wouldn't he be as mediocre and pitiful as those 99% who gave up at the first failure?

If Jake hadn't endured all that testing and training during his first Ordeal, he probably would have broken down instantly and his mind would have had to be picked up scrap by scrap with a spoon. He would have come out disoriented and terrified like all those poor aliens expelled from the Sanctuary Bubble.

Remembering the resentment and regret that had invaded him just before he sank into eternal oblivion, an unexpected rage bursting out of nowhere engulfed him, clashing directly with the sheer panic that prevented him from acting rationally.

A moment later when he escaped from the reef area, full of deadly sea currents, Jake found a calm and clean sea and with that tranquil sea, he finally found his own quietude back.

Squinting behind him because of the sun, Jake realized with some insight that the script for this scene had already changed from the previous one. He hadn't been bitten by a fish. The spilled blood hadn't attracted a shark and he hadn't dithered in the area of the wreck, thus escaping the deadly zone unhindered.

Momentarily, he felt such relief that he came close to laughing and sobbing at the same time. Yet his expression remained stern and focused. There was no way that this first trial could be over so easily. He was still too far from shore...

As if to confirm his hypothesis, the giant fin of the predator that had devoured him a few minutes earlier suddenly surfaced above the water in the wreckage area he had just escaped.

‘Fuck me sideways!’ Jake cursed as he started swimming again under a new rush of adrenaline.

He was a little ahead this time, but it wouldn’t make any difference. Looking back on his first experience, he wasn’t completely unprepared despite his emotional fragility. Persistent images of the monster’s fangs or of his guts spilling into the ocean were still etched on his retina and these hallucinations were transposed to reality, trying in vain to make him snap.

If he lost himself in this nightmarish memory, he would risk losing it immediately and his Second Ordeal would soon be over. Therefore, he tried to clench his teeth and mentally repeated the mantra ‘I can do it!’ focusing on the challenge rather than what to expect if he failed.

It was difficult with his current mental state, but with his Myrmidian bloodline his mind was much stronger and more resolute than before. He feared after his ‘death’ that his stats would have decreased significantly, but surprisingly his Aether of Intelligence and Extrasensory Perception had improved slightly. Even his Spirit Body was showing signs of growth, although it was still minimal.

Postponing these questions until later, Jake focused on the present situation. The sea monster was on top of him and at this rate he would be devoured in less than ten seconds. He absolutely had to find a way to get rid of the monster or find a way to gain speed, not to mention the damn school of jellyfish waiting for him a little further away. Who knew what other monstrous obstacle this event had in store for him?

The first thing he did was to activate his telekinesis to amplify his movements. The skill was too low level to allow him to control the waves or propel his body quickly, but he could still use it to assist his movements.

As he was about to execute his plan, he changed his mind.

'I can't fly fast, but as long as I float high enough, I have nothing to fear from that damn fish!'

Enlightened, he focused his willpower to pull himself out of the water, his body rapidly rising more than ten meters above the water's surface. This action alone made him sweat profusely and he remembered that because of the increased Aether density, his mind was also under great spiritual pressure.

He should be able to reach the shore by gritting his teeth, but there was a real risk of fainting before he reached land. If this happened, he would die instantly.

'No matter what, I have to give it a try!'

Xa, jvm jfl qpou dzmq ovu guearrare, lptturiw poouzut f hzw ar val qart, gzareare vaq gfhc om ovu nzuluro qmquro.

[Watch out!]

Scanning the ocean surface in panic, he immediately breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the giant shark wasn't on him yet.

Unfortunately, Xi yelled again, and her tone was more pressing than the previous one.

All of a sudden, a feeling of terror overtook him and his body stiffened like a hare about to be captured by the talons of an eagle. Raising his head to the sky, he barely got enough time to see a giant

shadow fall on him before he felt an agonizing pain pierce him through and through.

The same giant bird that stole his intestines in the previous simulation had just inserted its huge claws into his chest, holding him firmly in their grasp.

With his lungs and heart pierced, he only had time to discern the silhouette of the flying monster before his vision became blurred again. By the time he got used to the searing pain and overcame his loss of consciousness, it was already too late.

He saw a cloud of giant, pterodactyl-like birds fused with hideous vultures swooping down on him to steal the prey from their fellow creatures, and an aerial battle ensued in which he was the main stake.

In a fraction of a second, his body was shredded into multiple pieces and his head fell back into the ocean, the shark's jaw wide open waiting below to receive him.

GASP!

When Jake was resurrected once again, a long 'FUUUUUCKK!' 'pierced the silence as he was plummeting down into the ocean for the third time.

SPLASH!

The nightmare had just begun.