

The Oracle Paths

Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

Chapter 344 - What Is This Feeling?

'I'm not dead yet?'

That was Jake's first thought when he regained consciousness. He was then engulfed by a searing pain sweeping through his entire being, cruelly bringing him back to reality.

'Guh...'

It was the only half-stifled grunt that escaped from his tightly clenched teeth, half of which were broken. His body had almost melted, the bones of his skull visible in some places, had lost their whitish luster and had turned a charcoal gray color.

He looked awful, like out of a horror movie, but somehow he was still miraculously in one piece or so. He was missing both arms and his body was disfigured and charred, without skin or connective tissue. As for his bones, most of them had held up, but he still had quite a few fractures.

As he tried to lean on his missing arms to get up, he lost his balance and fell flat on his head. His forehead hit the steel floor with a resounding 'gong' that rattled his brain.

Paradoxically, instead of knocking him out again, fleeting images of what had happened a moment earlier came to his mind with the impetus of a tsunami. Jake felt so overwhelmed by this flood of information and emotion that he felt as if a vise was squeezing his chest, his breathing cut off as if he were having a violent asthma attack.

A few minutes earlier :

BOOOOM!

A diflv md jvaou iaevo giartut Jfcu, Rpgw frt Czfae gudmzu ovuw vft oaQu om zufiiw lfsMZ ovuaz sahomzw. A lvmhc jfsu, fhmqnfraut gw f suzw vaev ouQnuzfopzu giflo md uruzew hfpevo pn jaov ovuQ f lniao luhmrt ifouz frt ufhv zuffhout tadduzuroiw.

Craig, already at the end of his rope, was mentally exhausted after casting his Blue Soul Spell. The side effect of this spell was that the caster himself had to endure the same fate as his target. With the relief and exhilaration of victory over the Nosk, he could barely stand upright and his alertness was at an all-time low.

The explosion killed him instantly, the radiance disintegrating his flesh and bones indiscriminately.

Jake had not deactivated Bloodline Ignition and his alertness had never been broken. His past experience had proven to him that the Nosks were dangerous even after their death. With his Oracle Rank being the lowest, he had never stopped monitoring Bawopi's remains, ready to react to the slightest change.

His Aether of Strength, Agility and Constitution condensed in his legs to make the most breathtaking backward leap in his short life, while a telekinetic force field added a second level of thrust to help him accelerate prodigiously.

But then his Oracle Device did something he hadn't witnessed in a long time and never thought he would see again in such an Ordeal.

[Side Mission: Save your Soul Mate 'Ruby Hale' whatever it takes.]

Jake, who was about to break the sound barrier, shuddered when he encountered this mission, and to his own surprise, he wheeled towards the young skeletal woman with long white hair a few feet away from him.

His broad build and muscular arms caught up with the young woman frozen in place in a flurry and wrapped her in their embrace, shielding her from the coming blast. Ruby's sea-blue, amethyst eyes suddenly widened, but the shock wave a few centimeters away from her face momentarily stopped closing in on her, and the scenery began to flash before her eyes at breakneck speed.

Yet even Jake could not run away from such an explosion in such a confined space with such a heavy load of metal within him. The blast caught up with them. Out of protective instinct, because he wanted to fulfill his mission, or some other reason unknown to him, he pressed Ruby's face against his chest, guarding her skinny body entirely with his own flesh.

Just before impact, an icy power pulsed out of the young woman's body, covering both Jake and Ruby with a thick layer of ice. A telekinetic force field was also added to Jake's, forming a second protective layer.

A wink later, the blast of the explosion devoured them and their small bodies swirled through several halls in a heat storm like dust particles lost in the cosmic void. The room from which the blast had started had literally disappeared and a gaping void was there instead.

But contrary to what one might have thought, Jake and Ruby did not lose consciousness immediately. When the blast stopped propelling them and a sufficiently resilient wall stopped their flight, they knew they were safe.

The couple fell to the ground, Jake taking care even in his critical condition not to crush the silhouette of the young woman below him. When his arms collapsed to ashes, he rolled over to the side to let Ruby breathe.

The liquid alloy in his arms had been pulled back into his body in time to prevent any loss. His Oracle Device was intact.

Aside from a few broken bones, a number of burns and much of her hair consumed by the flames, revealing her scalp, the young woman could be considered unharmed compared to Jake.

The mission was accomplished and at that point, he sincerely believed he had done the right thing, even though he knew that it was foolish in his heart to sacrifice himself like that for a woman he had only met once more than six months ago. Without the Oracle's prompt, he would never have acted so unreasonably. It was as if his own will had faded away.

All of a sudden, as his consciousness was beginning to waver and the adrenaline was beginning to recede, giving way to unbearable pain, he saw the young woman standing up beside him as if it was nothing at all.

The look she gave him at that moment, he would remember it for the rest of his life. It was the most ghastly, chilling thing he had ever seen. There was an apathy bordering on contempt, while her features were relaxed and neutral as if all her wounds were irrelevant to her.

Most importantly, both of her eyes had turned amethyst-colored. Her blue-marine left iris was nowhere in sight.

Tvu wmpre jmQfr, ouQnmzfzaiw gfit, gpo hpzampliw loaii foozfhoasu frt dpil md uiuefrhu, cruio tmjr omjfztl vaQ, ovur euroiw zfr vuz ezfhudpi vfrt msuz val hzfhcut fzQmz iacu mru jmpit lozmcu f hfo.

'Thank you Jake.'

CRACK!

The young woman's fingers dug into his armor, her arms suddenly mobilizing unprecedented strength. Her arm muscles contracted, extraordinarily doubling in size, and his armor, already at its limit, shattered into pieces.

At that moment Jake was totally powerless and already semi-unconscious, the pain preventing him from aligning any coherent thought.

He felt the graceful hands of the young woman palpating him, dispossessing him in turn of all the Soul Stones he possessed. Then a bracelet pressed against his bare chest and a violent mental assault filled with sheer insanity ravaged his consciousness.

Unable to resist, he was on the verge of accepting anything when the pressure vanished and the young woman's arm retracted, leaving his bracelet and conscience clear. The palpations resumed instead and she returned to stripping him coldly.

After a while, when there was nothing left for him, he heard her bare feet slipping away and a Blue Soul Spell door that he had once unlocked closed behind him.

That was when he fainted.

What Jake felt, the vise pressing down on his chest, was a horrendous sense of betrayal and injustice. If it wasn't for the Oracle's mission, he might not even have tried to save her, and that was his reward?!

Was he just a sacrificial pawn so that the young woman could live?

Remembering the stupendous physical strength she had just displayed, he knew that she had fooled them all. She might even have been able to survive that explosion without any help. Why would she do that if she was so capable? She had just redefined the word 'low-key' before his very eyes.

Surprisingly, he didn't care about his defeat or the Soul Stones she had stolen from him. With utter dismay, he opened the Oracle System interface and shouted out Xi's name. He needed to hear her.

‘I’m here. Everything is all right now.’ Xi’s hologram had appeared before him, and her reassuring smile immediately soothed him.

The relief he felt when he discovered that no Slave Contract had been signed and that neither his Aether nor his liquid alloy had been stolen was indescribable. A little more and he would have burst into tears. He wasn’t sure his mind could have withstood such a setback.

Although he might have wondered about the reasons for such leniency, the introvert Jake was incapable of dealing with half-baked betrayals. He felt betrayed by both Ruby and the Oracle. He knew the Oracle was an asshole, but he still remembered the warm, almost candid smile of the young woman a few months earlier. Such a change in temperament was impossible to accept.

‘How long was I unconscious?’ Jake asked, too lazy to verify this information in the Oracle System himself.

‘About six hours.’ Xi informed him with a worried expression. ‘What are you going to do now?’

Jake slowly contemplated his options, then sighed wearily but resolutely.

‘To commit suicide.’

‘What do you mean?’ Xi questioned him confusedly. They were mentally connected, she could understand his intentions if she really wanted to, but even though his intention to commit suicide seemed sincere, there was another purpose. He hadn’t given up yet.

‘Look at the Player Ranking.’ Jake just said with a laugh. It was a laugh that was both joyful, but also filled with sorrow and grief.

Xi consulted the Player Ranking at his request and her mouth opened in amazement when she saw the current Ranking.

‘Ruby... is she... dead?’ Xi couldn’t believe it either.

Ultimately, after this betrayal, she had still failed.

‘And I think I know why.’ Jake said with a mysterious smile.

Like Ruby earlier, his facial features were relaxed. He had completely forgotten his pain.