

The Oracle Paths

Volume 4: The Purgatory

Chapter 397 - Survivors

After a couple of steps, Jake and the others quickly realized that Sarah wasn't as fearless and resolute as she appeared to be. Instead of approaching the tattooed Player obscénely leering at her, she had chosen to walk towards the bunch of pale men and women who never paid the slightest heed to her.

"Excuse me, will your group accept one more person?" Sarah asked sweetly, putting on her most charming smile.

Upon discovering the young fair-haired woman in front of him, far from being flattered, the handsome man standing out in front raised his eyebrows, but perhaps out of a sense of etiquette he kept his gentlemanly poise. The splendid woman at his side, however, was not so lenient when she sensed the arrival of a female competitor of the same kind as her.

"Go back to where you came from. We don't want you here." She waved her hand in front of Sarah as if she was chasing a mosquito. Her attitude could hardly have looked more dismissive.

The handsome man at her side was much more refined and kept an indifferent smile on his face, but his inaction demonstrated that he was not against it. Without a valid reason, he had no incentive to accept a complete stranger of unknown intentions. If someone had told him that the young woman had just acted out of sheer impulse to render Jake jealous, he probably wouldn't have believed it.

Though, that was really what happened. Of course, Sarah didn't spit the truth. She was bold, but not so brave as to explain her reasons from a distance where Jake and the others would easily be able to hear her.

It was the stunning pale woman who as a fellow vixen saw through her acting. Her eyes swayed quickly from Sarah to Jake and the more than obvious body language of the blond woman as well as Jake's genuinely upset look revealed everything she wanted to know.

In the face of Sarah's obvious motives and overflowing emotions, the pale woman was somewhat taken aback, but she readily ignored this minor detail. There were so many species and bloodlines in the Mirror Universe that all sorts of temperaments existed, even among humans. It was not because their intelligence was evolving rapidly that this state of affairs had changed, quite the contrary.

Still, the changes in Sarah's behavior were rather abrupt and for her comrades who knew her well, it was somewhat baffling. In particular, Kyle, who had known her for several years, had difficulty reconciling the image of the former Sarah with the one in front of him behaving in a completely irrational way to stir up the jealousy of a single man, who was anyway patently unconcerned if not annoyed by her shenanigans.

If Kyle could feel these changes, the two sisters, Will and Jake could also see that something was wrong.

'Xi, don't you think she's acting weird?' Jake asked for the opinion of his Oracle AI while keeping his eyes on Sarah. The bewitching swaying of her hips was certainly a plaisiré to the eyes, but it was his attention to the smallest detail that drove his rude action.

[Do you think she fell under the influence of a Fluid Ghost or one of those parasitic aliens?] Xi speculated disinterestedly. She was not a fan of this theory. Why bother finding a reason when Sarah could simply be so deep in love with him that she became stupid. Why did he always have to underestimate himself?

'Haha, I don't think so.' Jake smiled wryly. 'If she did, it would actually be good news. Unfortunately, it started long before the Third Ordeal. I thought for a while that her inferiority complex, Myrmidian personality and feelings could explain her lack of maturity, but not anymore.'

At first, Xi wanted to retort that he was making excuses and justifications that she didn't deserve, but she paused before saying something stupid. Eventually, she conceded,

[It's quite possible. In fact, it is more than likely. How is it that we missed it?]

'We didn't.' Jake objected coolly. 'We knew that she had accepted the Chaos Zhorion bloodline as a reward for the previous Ordeal. Her orange eyes were an obvious sign, and she didn't try to hide it when Will asked everyone to share their skills to optimize our cooperation. However, nothing prevented her from hiding the drawbacks of accepting this specific bloodline.'

'It would seem that the consequences on temperament are greater than we thought. When we returned from the Second Ordeal, the bloodline had just been assimilated and the physical transformation was far from over. Although the physical differences are subtle, the resulting impact on her character has only intensified.'

[There remains the possibility that between the Ordeals, the stress, the fear and all these conflicting emotions, she lost her temper and her true nature came to light. Maybe she's always been a toxic, irrational bitch when she falls in love.] His Oracle AI still reminded him not to dismiss the obvious for a more convenient truth.

'Sure, I'm not an idiot.' Jake finally loosened up. 'Let's see how it plays out.'

Ultimately, he was disappointed. Sarah continued to beg politely and sweetly despite the sarcasm of the gorgeous woman and the silence of the handsome man, proving that she could keep her nerve when she was determined.

In the end, the handsome man welcomed her into his group to everyone's surprise and made her promise to obey his every command. However, he did not invite her to join his faction. Sarah's intentions being impure, it was already highly impressive that he tolerated her presence.

Nevertheless, Sarah's move did create dissension among the male Players and not only in Jake's group. Those she had teased with her mischievous looks and languid poses felt deeply betrayed when she chose this sissy pale man. By welcoming Sarah into his group, the handsome man had also made himself a number of enemies.

"Jake..." Will whispered with a worried expression. He was afraid of Jake doing something stupid. He also gave a warning look to Kyle, who made no secret of his indignation and resentment towards the blonde girl.

Both sisters were also deeply affected. They were torn between defending their friend and doing nothing. Sadly, deep down they knew that Sarah was impossible to reason with. They had been trying for a whole month to bring her to her senses. No matter how hard they tried, it wasn't enough.

"Don't worry. "Jake comforted the businessman with a pat on the shoulder before turning to the others. "As for Amy at the time, it's her choice. I don't force anyone to follow me. As dangerous as these Ordeals are, the first four won't kill us. If you want to make mistakes, it's now or never. If you take it for granted that this Ordeal is just a game with no consequences, you will be much more relaxed about what comes next. Hopefully, Sarah will pull herself together. Even if she doesn't, she has nothing to fear."

The rest of the group was stunned listening to his speech, but upon careful consideration, they realized that it made perfect sense. As terrible and idiotic as Sarah's actions were, the very nature of the first four Ordeals ensured that she could afford to behave like a fool.

Of course, this would not be totally without consequences. If she was eliminated prematurely or indulged instead of striving to improve her rating, her growth would be affected and so would her potential to perform well on B842 or in future Ordeals.

Yet, with the support of her companions, failure was not a fatality in itself. Kyle was glaring proof of this. Although he had failed miserably on his second Ordeal, he could count on his comrades to make up for this mistake.

At the moment, he was probably the one who had the most reason to be happy among them. Because he had been so lousy during the previous Ordeal, his Oracle Rank and abilities were among the lowest of their faction and his Ordeal's Main Mission was, therefore, the simplest.

By surviving until the Titan Pearl was docked to the Yotai Shien 3 space station, he had already fulfilled the objective of his Main Mission. In comparison, Jake and the others still had no clue as to how to solve the mystery behind all those distress beacons.

Now that they knew that the previous sixteen expeditions of the Third Brotherhood to Riva 2 had gotten lost here, they had even more doubts than before.

For those who only had to find clues to succeed in their Main Mission, the Fluid Ghosts discovery and the pirates' testimony had unfortunately not been considered valid finds. They would have to dig a little more than that.

After Sarah's defection, Jake and the others were no longer in the mood for jokes and waited patiently for the return of the scouting units. Just 30 minutes later, as requested by Avy, the scouts sent to explore the station returned unharmed, to the utmost relief of the general and her officers. Only one team was late.

A few minutes later, the power was even restored and the station's intact neon lights lit up one after the other, sizzling. However, during their lighting phase, these dazzling neon flickered stroboscopically several times, imprinting their retinas and blinding them briefly before stabilizing for good.

No one noticed during these black l'apses that spectral shapes as inconspicuous as shadows infiltrated the Titan Pearl under their nose. Even the vigilant Players like Jake did not see a thing.

An hour later, the last team of scouts returned unharmed, but not alone. They were accompanied by a group of survivors in poor condition. They were all young, but their bodies were emaciated and their expressions bewildered, as if they could not acclimatize to the light. The slightest noise seemed to startle them.

"Alonzo! "

Recognizing the young man at their head, the young general shouted excitedly before throwing herself into his arms.

