

The Oracle Paths

Volume 4: The Purgatory

Chapter 401 - The Real Threat

Jake and his group continued to run furiously long after the shrill squeaks of the monsters had subsided. It had to be said that the string of System notifications had not helped them relax at all.

The Oracle had waited for the ship to ditch them before tasking them with all these missions and that could only mean one thing: The previous incidents were at best not serious enough to warrant rewarding their efforts with points, and at worst foreseen from the start. In any case, for them, this did not bode well.

Considering that the first Side Mission they had received had been simply to reach the command room, which had proved to be ludicrously simple, the second option was more likely.

Embarrassingly, it was Will who forced the group to stop. Although his thigh injury had been transferred to Jake, his stamina was simply the worst of the group. Even Tim and Lily weren't sweating as much as he was.

His face was red and congested, and he was wheezing like a tuberculosis patient on his last breath. He looked like he was going to collapse at any moment.

Seeing his condition, Jake made no comment and immediately looked for an unlocked door among those lining the endless hallway where they were wandering aimlessly. After a few unsuccessful attempts, he gave up and directly punched the identification device of the nearest door.

The door not opening for all that, he grumbled in a bad mood and then pressed his burning hands against the thick metal structure which started to redden, then melt in a few seconds. It was no easy feat and he had to mobilize all the Aether and Fluid at his disposal to accomplish this task in record time.

Using his telekinesis, he wrapped himself with the molten metal as a precautionary measure before carefully stepping inside. His Aether Vision didn't notice anything special in the darkness, but his mental scan did find a few mummified corpses lying in the room.

One of them had literally holed himself to death in what appeared to have been a refrigerator, while the other two still had their bones intertwined after killing each other. The weapons responsible for these crimes were still in the desiccated chest of their respective victims, namely a cartridge pen and a huge syringe.

Without proper light, it was difficult to reconstruct the actual scene, but at least the Fluid Cores and meridians of these corpses were intact. Unexpected as it may seem, they had escaped the attention of the parasites and Fluid Ghosts all this time.

Most interestingly, their souls had dissipated in a natural way or the resulting Fluid Ghosts would have naturally devoured all those fresh Fluid Cores at their disposal. It was too tempting a buffet to be ignored for those brainless supernatural creatures.

Yet, the situation was not normal. The fact that one of them had been so terror-stricken that he had deliberately chosen to stay in a fridge until he died, while the other two, obviously colleagues, had killed each other for an equally mysterious reason, was a cruel reminder that these humans had not fully succeeded in escaping their enemy's grip.

Still they were indeed long dead and the room was clean. Jake sighed with relief and motioned for his comrades to enter. Once everyone was inside, he warmed up the metal surrounding him and repatched the space behind him without the slightest bit of finesse. It looked like a red hot metal blob of spit, but it still did the job.

Finally safe, at least that was the relative impression they had, Will slid down to the floor before taking a bottle of water out of his Space Storage and chugging it down the neck.

Crackle!

Hearing the crackling sound under his buttocks, Will sensed something was wrong, but he was too tired to care. He was already seeing stars. It was Vincent's mocking remark, pointing a flashlight at him, that made him regain a surge of vigor.

'Nice seat. '

'Crap!' Will sprang up with the abrupt rise in adrenaline, but his exhaustion caught up with him immediately and he almost fell back again. If Kevin hadn't caught him by the back of his collar, he would have definitely embarrassed himself in front of everyone.

'Have you also been poisoned? Jake asked with a frown.

His concern was not feigned. It was a possibility. Whether it was the substance these parasitic monsters produced, a venom contained in their claws and fangs, or the pathogenic bacteria swarming in their saliva, these monsters were a breeding ground for potentially deadly dangers.

Except that at that very moment for Will, Jake's genuine concern dealt a deep blow to his ego and he almost choked himself to death as he caught his breath.

He wasn't sure yet but he couldn't say it! His mouth opened but no sound came out. He was really at his wit's end. Good God! They had run more than ten kilometers in one go, sprinting like there was no tomorrow. That he was still alive was already worthy of praise! While thinking this way, he did not even realize that his thoughts were no longer coherent. With the Myrtharian Body bonus, ten kilometers should have been nothing.

He would have loved to say that he was doing the best he could under the circumstances, but his previous swearing had drained him of his last strength. Instead of answering, he plopped down against a wall again, this time in a place without dead bodies.

Honestly said, Will wasn't that bad. He was simply with the wrong team mates. Because of the Aether density being raised to 200, his once decent Aether stats were now equal to that of the natives, and that was only because the Oracle took pity on the participants by raising their Aether stats pre-emptively to keep them from suffering too much.

The Oracle System had elevated the stats of the weaker participants to this lower limit, but this meant, among other things, becoming a mere human again, or nearly so. Without the passive bonus of the Myrtharian Body bestowed by their faction he would have never gotten so far.

Ao ovu lfqu oaqu, Jfcu frt Kusar gmov nzmsut ovuqluisul jmZovw md ovuaz qmrlouz lofopl. Kusar jfl loaii ar val Wuzugufz dmzq fdouz fii, gpo ovu ifzeu jmprt mr val guiiw vft fiqmlo himlut.

Jake had also healed his own leg wound. Between his Body and Aether stats, his Vitality was still almost 60 times that of the natives of this world. By focusing all of his Green Aether on this wound, recovery in less than an hour was not surprising.

However, it came at a cost and the two cousins were now hungry. Without further ado they dug into their supply of Digestor jerky and began to gorge themselves while they still could. Who knows when these monsters would come back?

Despite their apparent safety, the only light they had was from their flashlights and none of them dared to make any more noise than necessary for fear of attracting the monsters they had just shaken off.

So the eating was done in total darkness, with a leaden silence. Except for Jake and Kevin who were busy feeding their stomachs, no one managed to relax. The chewing noises of the two cousins did not help.

About twenty minutes later, after wolfing down several pounds of meat, Jake stopped eating, then Kevin a few minutes later.

‘Will, how are you feeling?’ Jake inquired again about his condition. Inwardly, he felt that this companion of his should not have been so drained.

‘Will?’

No answer.

‘Fuck. Will, it’s not funny.’

This kind of joke wasn’t quite the businessman’s style and Esya who was crouched next to him immediately steered a small fireball over to shed some light on him. Seeing his sorry state, everyone drew a cold breath.

Will was sprawled unconscious on his side, his breathing so shallow that he might as well have been dead. Their friend’s body right now had become horribly pale, almost translucent as if he were about to disappear. The Fluid Core behind his glabella was now visible,

forming a blackish almond surrounded by a network of tiny dark veins occupying his entire skull and tapering off at the throat level until vanishing completely.

These were his Fluid Meridians, and they should have been covering every inch of the body of a healthy native. Fluid was vital to everything in this world, like Aether in the Mirror Universe. If an object, living or not, reached an Aether density of 0, it would simply cease to exist.

Intuitively, Jake had thought until then that this Fluid Core was just a bonus, but apparently he was wrong. No. Fluid and Aether were ultimately the same thing! Will shouldn't have been affected that much.

Enya beat him to it as she rested her bracelet against the nerd's own.

'As I thought...' She sighed, hating herself for not thinking of it sooner. 'He should be alright, but that was a close call. It would have been hazardous if it had been someone else who was affected.'

Her reply raised many doubts, but surprisingly Esya who had been the most seriously injured appeared to also share their incomprehension.

'Can you fill us in?' Vincent grumbled with annoyance. All that tension had finally gotten the better of his nerves.

'I think it's best for you guys to take a look for yourself...' Enya retorted without getting upset.

With a thought, she transferred to all of them Will's Oracle Status that she had peered into a few seconds ago and the truth of the matter was thus fully revealed before their very eyes.

[AETHER STATUS:]

[Strength(S): 0.54]

[Agility(A): 0.63]

[Constitution(C): 0.42]

[Vitality(V): 0.37]

[Intelligence(I): 11.3]

[Perception(P): 9.9]

Extrasensory Perception(EP): 12.1]

These Aether stats were not temporary. They would never rise back to their maximum intrinsic value. The 200 pts Aether density of this world would theoretically allow him to regain proper stats, but once back in the Mirror Universe his stats would remain as displayed above.

His standard of existence as a lifeform had been lowered so much that the weakest of earthlings could have sent him into the afterlife with a single flick of the wrist. Only his cognitive faculties had barely been preserved.

‘He was still fine a few minutes ago when we were running. Why didn’t we notice anything? And why are the two sisters okay?’ Daniel raised the two main issues in deep concern.

The family man was not stingy with words, but he had a good head on his shoulders. He rarely spoke for nothing.

‘Several possibilities.’ Jake said flatly. ‘First of all, he’s the only one who’s been bitten for a long time. Enya and Esya only suffered lacerations. Will may have been aware that his injury was more serious than it appeared, hence his initial refusal to transfer it.’

‘To tell the truth, Esya and I were also harmed, but we just lost a small amount of Fluid. At the time, it didn’t seem like such a big deal.’ The young woman hastily admitted.

‘Sorry big sister, but I lied.’ Esya fidgeted nervously. ‘My Fireball skill is gone.’