

The Oracle Paths

Volume 4: The Purgatory

Chapter 402 – Fear of Failure

‘What?!’

The gasp was unanimous. Such a rebound could not be taken lightly. If this continued over time, the repercussions would not be limited to this Ordeal alone.

‘Why didn’t you say anything?’ Enya questioned her with a hurt expression.

‘I didn’t want to worry you...’ Her sister confessed sheepishly.

In response, Jake and the others drew a long, weary sigh. They couldn’t really blame her, but it was clear that she was partially responsible for Will’s condition. If she had spoken up a little earlier, they might have been able to act in time.

Though, the biggest culprit was Will himself. It would have been enough for him to tell them about it. Even without any solution, it would have at least warned the rest of the group.

After Jake reconfirmed that Will’s condition was not worsening, he asked the younger sister a few more questions to clarify the facts. It turned out that this Skill’s disappearance was not just a matter of missing words in her Oracle Status.

Esya had also lost most of her past memories of using this skill. Fireballs being her preferred means of attack, she consequently had quite a few holes in her memory.

‘The bite of these monsters targets the soul, the brain and the Aether Code.’ Vincent concluded pessimistically.

They all had ugly faces at this point. If they could recover with time it wouldn’t be so bad, but that hardly seemed to be the case...

‘We need to stabilize Will first.’ Jake refocused the topic on their unconscious comrade.

‘I already said he should recover with enough rest.’ Enya repeated a second time.

‘You’re wrong.’ Daniel curtly disagreed with her without Jake having to make an argument. ‘If these stats are right, he should already be dead.’

Enya pondered these words for a brief moment, then her face lit up in understanding.

‘I get it now.’

‘I don’t.’ Tim and Lily objected in unison.

‘In a word: gravity.’ Vincent coughed, clearing his throat. ‘Because the Aether density of this world is 20 times higher than normal, the drop in his Strength and Constitution stats should have killed him.’

It wasn’t hard to understand with their intelligence, but not everyone among them had a basic understanding of physics. They had to explain in detail these basic notions so that the two children, Esya and Enya, could understand the issue.

The two sisters’ world was not so backward, but the laws of physics were approached from a ‘magical’ angle. As long as it worked, it was good. A bit like acupuncture or the placebo effect. They didn’t need to understand the how and why.

‘That doesn’t explain why he is still alive.’ Enya finally said. ‘As far as I know, he doesn’t have an Aether or Oracle Skill to survive this, right? At least, I didn’t see any of that in his status.’

‘That’s because the ambient Aether makes up some of that deficit.’ Daniel explained serenely. ‘Regardless of our actual stats, they’ll tend toward 200 as long as we’re here. His Aether deficit is causing a local vacuum that the surrounding Aether is trying to fill, but he’ll still die if we do nothing.’

‘Unless his stats stop dropping.’ Jake added. ‘His AI was probably affected or it would have automatically maxed out his stats to their original value. I know he has enough Aether in storage for that.’

‘In any case, it’s a reassuring discovery. It means that under normal circumstances, it’s impossible for our Aether levels to drop below the level of the world we’re in. Let’s be wary though. A little more and Will would be gone.’

‘Right, so what do we do?’ Kevin grinned, playing dumb.

‘For real?’ Enya snorted with a derisive look as she connected her bracelet to Will’s again in order to manually re-encode his stats.

Naturally, she paid the few thousand points needed to complete the transaction. Even though it was only a few points, everyone contributed equally, including Kevin with a wry laugh.

Within seconds, Will’s color returned and his intangible body became solid and grounded in reality again. Everyone was relieved to see that this method worked, but they were soon disappointed.

A few minutes later, Will’s Aether stats dropped again and he became translucent as if he were about to disappear for good.

In the end, they repeated the procedure over six times before his stats stabilized completely.

‘Fuck, he better pay for the next restaurant when we get back.’ Kevin loudly cursed as he thought back to all that precious Aether wasted.

Ignoring his stingy cousin, Jake and the others then inspected Esya, who despite her reassuring smile was also growing increasingly pale.

Jake had long since scanned Will and Esya and knew that this was not a poison, but a bacterium harbored by the creatures that had injured them. It was in their saliva, but also on their skin, teeth and claws. Truly a perfect example of symbiotic evolution, as disgusting as it was.

With enough time, they would probably weave the dreaded substance giving birth to these monsters, devouring the vital organs one by one.

‘Don’t use your flames to kill them.’ Jake ordered Enya as he saw her approaching her sibling. ‘Let her immune system do its job.’

The three cousins, who had the best Constitution and Vitality of the group, all pressed a hand against Esya’s back and transferred Aether to her, until her boosted immunity did the rest. When they removed the golden and emerald halo enveloping her, she was completely healed.

‘Phew... Not as problematic as I thought.’ Kevin laughed proudly. ‘Jake and me are basically immune with our body stats.’

‘Don’t speak too soon.’ Vincent snapped, punching him in the shoulder. ‘We don’t know anything about these creepy critters and I wouldn’t advise you to let them bite you. You’re already stupid, if you lose a few more memories or skills like Esya, you’ll definitely become a retard.’

‘Bad joke.’ Esya grunted. Inwardly, she was extremely distressed about having forgotten something important.

‘Talk to your Oracle AI.’ Jake patted her back. ‘The bracelet keeps everything. Even if you forgot your Fireball Skill, you should be able to learn it again.’

‘Oh, why didn’t I think of that sooner!’ Esya became hopeful again.

After a moment, she shouted, ‘It works!’

Everyone was relieved to hear the news. It would have been terrifying if the Oracle AI was also damaged. All that was left now was to confirm with Will when he woke up.

[It’s reassuring, but unlike them, our minds are linked Xi warned him in a somber tone. If your soul is affected, I doubt I’ll get through this unscathed. I can make copies of the information, but I can’t hide them from the Oracle System. They will instantly know something is wrong with both of us.]

‘Then let’s avoid getting hit.’

That was the only answer Jake could give her. Even though he was putting on a brave face in front of the others, he was just as worried. A few minutes later, Will came to.

‘How are you feeling? How many fingers do I have? What’s your name? Do you remember how much you owe me?’

Kusar nzmqnoiw ovzuj f gfzzfeu md ypuloamrl fo vaq om qfcu lpzu vu jfl qurofiiw lmprt.

‘Uh... Fine? Four? Will Hopkins... Go fućk yourself! You’re the one who owes me 400 Aether points! And what’s with all the questions?’

‘He’s fine!’ Kevin announced with a victorious smile. ‘But sorry, I’m afraid you are now the one in debt.’

Will looked at them in turn and seeing their serious expressions, he growled,

‘What is he talking about?’

‘Talk to your Oracle AI.’ Jake said again.

As the businessman listened to his AI’s report and patched up the many holes in his recent memory, his expression darkened until he let out a lengthy defeated sigh.

‘That was close... I screwed up big time on that one.’ Will acknowledged frankly.

‘Glad you realize that.’

Jake wanted to lecture him, but seeing him aware of the problem he lost his drive.

‘Did you lose one of your skills like Esya?’

‘What?! Esya lost a...’

His response was as expected. After being updated by his friends, he confirmed their doubts.

‘That explains the memory lapses. Fortunately, my AI was there...’

Although he didn’t tell them which of his skills were missing, his pale, alarmed face was more than enough of a prediction. In the end, his AI had solved the problem as it had for Esya and that was all that mattered.

Yet, no one was deceiving themselves. A past memory forgotten, then rediscovered was not quite the same thing. It was hard to predict whether it would have consequences...

With Esya and Will out of the way, they could finally focus on their surroundings. A dark room, three dead bodies and a smell mixed with rust and staleness.

They hardly dared to whisper and move, for fear of making any noise, but if they wanted to leave this place one day they had to finish their missions.

The big difference, however, compared to before, was that they now feared these aliens. Death was no longer inconsequential, even if they survived their Ordeal.

Sometimes Jake couldn't help but wonder in irony if the Oracle was aware of all these dangers or if he was purposely messing with them.

Adouz f lvmzo gzufc, Jfcu frt ovu ojm lalouzl nzmsatut iaevo gw jfdoare lmqu dazugfiil fzmprrt ovuq frt ovu ezmpn nzmhuutut om uknimzu ovu zmmq. Tvuzu jfl f zalc ovfo ovu qmrlouzl hmpit tuouho ovulu vufo lmpzhul, gpo juii... usuzwovare jfl zalcw tmjr vuzu.

Except for the fridge containing a corpse and some screens and other machines that were turned off, they found nothing conclusive. All these devices were intriguing, but they were old, and with no power to make them work was hopeless.

But they did not give up the search. Besides these old devices, there was also a shelf full of binders and some books filled with incomprehensible formulas.

With his knowledge, Jake recognized some terms and was able to deduce that they were researching the genome of an unknown creature. Maybe the one of the monsters crawling all over the station.

After a while, Tim's excited voice rang out,

'I found something!'