

The Oracle Paths

Volume 4: The Purgatory

Chapter 411 - Purgatory

Before their stunned eyes, their strained minds struggled to adjust to a new, almost unreal environment, given the space station they were wandering around in vain like lost souls.

Gone were the monstrous, bloodthirsty aliens chasing them. Instead, there was an enchanting and peaceful landscape. Beautiful stone houses with perfect triangular red brick roofs, cobblestone paths, well-mown lawns, a forest, a fountain, and a small lake.

The contrast was so stark that the group in the elevator blinked stupidly several times, Will even pinching Kyle to make sure it wasn't a dream. Hearing the former Playboy mōàn in pain, he had to accept reality.

In this fantasy village, they could see other humans like themselves and their appearances this time were not as fanciful. They recognized the uniforms of some of the Titan Pearl soldiers, but also the crazy and trademark style of the Players in the same situation as them.

Vincent was about to exit the elevator first when Jake stopped him.

‘Hold on. There’s something odd going on.’

His cousin squinted as he observed the village more closely and noticed something this time.

‘Indeed... It’s as if these people can’t see us.’ Vincent nodded skeptically. ‘And the colors seem a little too saturated to be real.’

‘Nevertheless... This is the only way out.’

‘Right...’ Jake acknowledged gloomily.

Daniel proved to be more pragmatic.

‘ Step aside. ‘ He said as he hustled them to make his way to the elevator entrance.

Jake and the others let him and watched as he simply pointed a gun at the floor in front of the elevator. He pulled the trigger and a shot rang out and... nothing.

No impact marks, no dust kicked up. The soldiers and players in the village showed no reaction to the shot. The bullet was literally gone.

This time Vincent sacrificed one of his knives by throwing it a few meters in front of him. To no one’s surprise, the object never landed on the other side. It simply vanished.

Kevin clicked his tongue as he watched this curious sight.

‘Jake?’ Will sounded him out with great composure.

Not knowing any more than they did, Jake heaved a long sigh and made his decision.

‘Either we get out, or we go back and face the monsters. If those Players and soldiers are alive somewhere, we should be okay too. At least, I hope so. ‘

He had barely finished his sentence when Vincent took the step before anyone could stop him. As if he had just crossed an illusion, his body passed through and he disappeared.

‘Vincent?’

The group tried to contact him via the bracelet to no avail. However, when Jake checked his 5th Side Mission status, he noticed that Vincent's name was not grayed out. Whatever his circumstances were, he was still alive.

Jake reported the information to the others and they made up their minds. Besides staying in the elevator, they had no other satisfactory choice anyway.

'See you later. 'Kevin waved his hand and disappeared.

Jake sized up Arryn, Siraye and the two children in turn with a pessimistic face, but he did his best not to dampen their spirits. He hoped they would all be together on the other side or he could say goodbye to his 5th Side Mission's Perfect Rating.

Of course, his luck was utterly crap compared to Tim's. When he left the elevator, he found a village identical to the one they had seen, but none of the faces there were familiar. Hell, they weren't even the same soldiers and players they had seen in the elevator.

The village, though, was indeed identical down to the last brick. His appearance immediately drew the attention of the other people present. Everyone was gathered in the village's central plaza, a small cobblestone square with a tiny fountain in the center and step-like stands reminiscent of an amphitheater or forum of antiquity.

In the old days, this was the kind of community place where decisions, votes and debates took place. Of course, it was not exactly like on earth. There were subtle differences in the architecture of the village, including the height of the doors, the color and type of wood used. The design was still essentially medieval, not to say archaic.

Most notably, there were mysterious runes emitting a faint black light covering the floor and walls of each structure. Not really in the mood

to visit the village at the moment, he tried again to communicate with his comrades in vain. Even Vincent and Kevin, who were supposed to have already crossed, remained unreachable.

Out of spite, Jake therefore decided to look at the other people present. Including himself, he counted 27 people. Just over half were Titan Pearl soldiers, but he also recognized two technicians and an officer from their uniforms. The other nine people present were Players like himself.

Of these Players, four caught his eye.

The first was a black man with a Mike Tyson-like boxer's physique, wearing thick plate armor and carrying a huge war hammer. The warrior was almost as tall as he was and was nonchalantly chewing on a thick, unlit cigar without paying attention to anyone.

The second was a Native American-looking woman wearing a short skin dress and a pair of buckskin boots, while a fur cape draped her shoulders. The tiara on her forehead and adorned with painted feathers gave her a certain presence. She was not very old, perhaps in her thirties, and because of that she attracted most of the male gaze.

The third was a stunning young woman with immaculate pallor and intense ruby irises. He recognized her as the one who had called back the girl who had attacked him for no reason and who belonged to the group that Sarah had joined. At the moment she seemed nervous, but above all extremely annoyed and did not pay the slightest attention to his arrival except for a brief glance. Perhaps because of her iciness, the lecherous men preferred to avoid her.

The last one was an excessively tattooed Asian man wearing a simple tank top. Unconsciously, Jake focused more on him, comparing the tattoos on his arms to the snake-laced scepter he hoped to find.

Getting his hands on the bearer of such a tattoo was his best plan right now to identify the Titan Pearl's saboteur.

In the face of his insistent stare, the tattooed man snorted and pointed a long cutlass at his throat with a threatening look.

Jake ignored his attempts at intimidation and finally found a step to sit on, shutting himself up in silence. He tried again to contact his comrades, but ultimately concluded that it was a waste of time.

He also tried to navigate his way to them by using the Location Wish to generate an Oracle Path, but his Shadow Guide remained unresponsive. The Prediction function appeared completely dysfunctional. He was unable to determine when it had first started.

Was it since the monsters arrived on the Titan Pearl? Or was it even earlier as a result of the Fluid excess? What was certain was that the bracelet was no longer a reliable tool. Although, with his Second Ordeal mishap with Ruby, he felt that the Oracle never was.

Jake also did a scan of the area, and with Xi concluded that the village was both real and fake. It was not simply the product of powerful technology, nor was it an illusion. A powerful magic was at work, confusing illusion and reality, but as long as it was active this village and all the objects inside would continue to exist.

'How weird...'

[Tval Oztufi vfl tusafout dzmq aol rmzqfi hmpzlu.] Xa lptturiw talhmrhuzout vaq fl lvu talhimlut vuz dartare fdouz f imre zudihoamr.

'Should I be worried?'

[The scan results are conflicting. It's not supposed to happen in a Third Ordeal, but the Oracle still hasn't sent you back. The link to the

Oracle System has not been severed yet, so I guess it has deemed the risk acceptable.]

'I guess 95% mortality rate is an acceptable risk for theOracle...' Jake lampooned dryly.

As he talked with Xi, the village continued to fill with new natives and players. By the time they were almost fifty in the town square, a new and unusual arrival made his appearance.

Hooded under a lengthy pea coat with long sleeves that covered his hands, his face was an ocean of indiscernible darkness. Underneath his coat was a tight-fitting black armor and a leather belt with several long carbon tubes attached to it:

An Inquisitor.

As he took his first step into the square, the Inquisitor scanned each person present with his non-existent face and they all shuddered subconsciously. Even a corpse seemed more alive than this fellow.

Eventually, the Consortium Hound ignored them completely. He simply brushed his sleeve over the runes on the cobblestone floor with an enigmatic air before sitting down like the others upon one of the forum stairs.

To Jake's utter annoyance, the Inquisitor had to choose a seat less than two meters away from him. He could not help but curse his bad luck for the second time in less than an hour.

With his suspicious and paranoid mind, Jake's thoughts soon drifted into wild conspiracy theories,

'Can Tim make other people unlucky?'

[Your luck is normal.] Xi reassured him. [You don't have the Luck Encoding, but the bracelet can detect abnormalities like that if you

want it to. Luck is like the world's favor. Most people don't have any at all, but that's different from being unlucky.]

[To check your luck, ask the bracelet to simulate a coin toss billions of times in a row and pick a face. If the result is around 50% success, all is well.]

' Oh, I didn't think the bracelet could be used like that. I thought the bracelet's luck depended on the Oracle System's luck, not mine.'

[Not if you're using the basic computational capabilities of your own bracelet, or in other words, mine.]

'I see.'

A flash of blue light ended their dialogue. In the meantime, the number of people present had risen to 73 and it had been about 5 minutes since any newcomers had appeared.

During these last couple of minutes, a few incidents had broken out. Nothing too serious: a few insults and threats of no consequence, but the loudness had increased significantly. Most people seemed to be on edge, and the dirty looks were no longer as well contained, nor were the murderous intentions.

There was no smoke without fire and the apparent peace could escalate like wildfire at any moment. The flash of light had at least the merit of bringing everyone back to reality: They were all gathered in the same place and still didn't know why.

When the blue light faded, a large circular marble table was erected in front of the fountain in the square's center. On it, black metal cards formed a perfectly ordered pile.

With his high perception, Jake had no trouble reading the gold-bound letters on the card at the top of the pile. The word was simple and clear, but held immense threat in its meaning:

Purgatory.