

The Oracle Paths

Volume 4: The Purgatory

Chapter 413 - First Role

The bulk of the rules were clear and concise, but also extremely vague, Jake noted inwardly. With the exception of the Monster and the Villagers, the other Roles, if there were any, were not spelled out.

It was all the more disturbing because not all the houses in the village looked alike. On the corner of the street he could make out a building that looked like a restaurant or a tavern, while a little farther on a dead smithy was waiting to be rekindled. The small stone castle at the top of the hill and by the lake stood out even more and could not be ignored. There was even a kind of chapel or small temple bearing the effigy of an obscure deity.

Depending on the card functions, roles and other unmentioned possibilities related to the environment, he could imagine a multitude of scenarios deviating from the original game. With the financial and tactical dimension brought by the Fluid Card, this could quickly evolve in an unforeseen direction.

The rest of the five minutes passed quietly, until the bored hologram spoke again. The natives and Players had calmed down, but distrust was on every face.

‘Is everyone done? Well, never mind. ‘The hologram clapped his hands together to get their attention with a cheerful swagger. ‘I’ll give you one last chance to ask your questions before the Round begins. Any questions?’

The Native American woman immediately raised her hand,

‘I have one. ‘She said, pausing briefly to search for her words. ‘It says that you lose the game when you die, when your Purgatory Card runs out of Fluid, or when you violate the rules. The death case is explicit, but what happens if we lose in the other two cases? ‘

Jake nodded. It was a good question.

‘Of course, there is something set up for those situations, but it’s not a Monster Game rule, but a Purgatory rule. ‘ The modified voice explained seriously this time. ‘Whether it’s disobeying the rules or bankruptcy, you will be punished.

‘Purgatory is a place of penance and atonement. You must pay for your faults and sins. So in both of these examples, you will be sent to the Pit. If you survive, you will be given a second chance. For those whose Purgatory Card was depleted, 5M units will be returned to them.

‘Each time you return to the Pit, the punishment will be greater, but you may also come out of it stronger. Though, the most likely conclusion is death. Believe me, running into a pack of Hunters would be by far the lightest punishment...‘

Most of the natives turned a shade whiter when they heard this last, barely concealed threat. Even for the Players, facing these Hunters in large numbers was extremely dangerous. For the weaker Players, even one of these creatures was an almost insurmountable challenge.

The only person who remained completely unfazed was the Inquisitor, the emotions on his non-existent face impossible to read.

‘Any more questions? ‘

The Native American Player raised her hand again, determined to ask anything she wanted to know.

‘Yes?’ The hologram whispered with annoyance.

‘Is it possible to know the list of existing cards and their function?’

‘No.’ The voice was adamant. ‘It will be up to you to work them out as you go along, either by picking them or by bearing the cost. This unknown will help to make this experience more interesting. What I can tell you is that each card has a certain rarity. Some Roles are also unique. It’s up to you to draw the appropriate conclusions.’

‘Another question? No? Then bye and good Purgatory!’

The hologram gave the young woman no chance. Its figure dissipated with a dramatic laugh and silence returned to the square. Instead, a genuine robotic voice echoed in their heads as their Purgatory Cards flashed.

[The Monster Game has begun. Use Draw, to get your first Role. You have 60 seconds. Any refusal or delay will be treated as a disobedience of the rules and thus a forfeit.]

Like the others, Jake hurried to draw his Role.

[Villager: Forest Warden (Rare)(Upgradeable): May walk freely in the forest by day and night. Owns a map showing the location of resources and dangers in the forest. He can also authorize and/or forbid a person to enter the forest by Cycle.]

His luck was not bad for once. His bad luck seemed to have run out with his previous misadventures. Now he would have to compare this Role to the other participants, but just the mention of ‘Rare’ was enough to make him happy.

To tell the truth, he was relieved he hadn't picked the Monster Role. It would have made him the enemy of the majority and other than attacking other participants during the night he had no other privileges and little room to maneuver. At least at the beginning of the game.

Once he got his role, he screenshotted every person, whether it was their facial expression or their hormonal state with a scan. If there was ever a time for participants to get emotional, it was during this tiny window.

He successfully obtained an individual 'photo' of each participant, but all information about their hormones and neurochemistry was blocked by a mysterious energy. Having a nasty feeling, he tried to access his Space Storage, and failed miserably.

[We are in a Restricted Space] Xi solemnly informed him. The creator of this place has sealed it off from the rest of the world. He dictates what goes in and out, and that goes for your Space Storage as well. If you can't dissolve this spell, I'm afraid it's going to last. My guess is that these runes have something to do with it.]

Jake's face grew sullen, but at least his Aether Storage was still accessible. According to Xi, this was because Aether was an energy held directly within the liquid alloy forming the bracelet. It wasn't a separate dimensional pocket.

'That's going to make it difficult.' He finally muttered with a frown. 'That means that other than the food and water in my backpack, I have no supplies. Good thing I was carrying my machete with me.'

He quickly scanned the other participants and realized that most of the Players had made the same mistake he had. With the exception of a weapon, some ammunition and a backpack, all but one of the Players were in the same predicament as he was.

The last one was hyperventilating uneasily after coming to the realization that he had neither weapon nor supplies with him. Or perhaps he was panicking about something else? Maybe his Role? Jake reminded himself to keep an eye on him.

At long last, the sixty seconds ticked by and the Round officially began. Jake expected them to be given new instructions, but the robotic voice didn't speak again.

Circumspect, the soldiers and Players exchanged doubtful glances but didn't dare to take any initiative. If no one moved, they could have kept staring into each other's eyes indefinitely, but the Inquisitor broke the stalemate.

He rose to his feet and walked out of the public square, his black cloak fluttering behind him with the airy grace of a ghost. Then they saw him pause in front of one house, then another, until he stopped for good in front of one of them. He then opened the door with a twist of the handle and went inside, never to be seen again.

Having understood that they were free to attend to their business, everyone got up at the same time and deserted the square in a great commotion. Jake in turn began to walk along the cobblestone streets, looking for his own residence.

On the way, he memorized everything he saw, especially when a participant walked into their own house. His rational mind was telling him that this would be of importance later on.

Adouz f lvmzo jfic jvuzu vu salaout vfid md ovu saiifeu, jvahn jfl rmo ovfo gae, vu dmpvt val mjr vmplu fo ovu urt md ao. Tvu vmplu jfl hmxw, mnnmlaou ovu dmzulo frt zmmqauz ovfr vu uknuhout jaov f lqfii efztur.

The old wood front door had his initials in freshly dried gold paint, as if someone had come to put the finishing touches on the building a few minutes earlier. Jake couldn't help but wonder what kind of devilry was at work.

The more he learned about this Village, the less optimistic he became about his chances. While he had originally planned to steamroll over all adversity, he now wondered if he should lower his ambitions and focus on his main mission instead.

This world was dangerous. He was strong among the natives, but he was not the ultimate life form. Especially not in this place. Whether the enemy was Sigmar or someone else, everything pointed to the final boss being a Fluid Grandmaster of unparalleled power.

This Village proved that the person behind it could already affect reality with his powers and create real objects out of thin air. At his own level, it was just too sophisticated, mystical and unfathomable, almost like real magic.

Forgetting his worries, Jake eventually took a deep breath and pushed open the front door. The interior proved to be as welcoming and simple as he had imagined.

The pine furniture was basic but functional, the fireplace homey, while the bed wasn't worth mentioning. The few notable elements were the forest map placed on the table along with a complete ranger's gear with a bow, cutlass and arrows.

Yet, what immediately caught his eye was the old clock nailed to the wall opposite the front door. An hour was marked on it, the hands moving about twice as fast as normal.

‘9:16 am,’ Jake read after some effort. It was the first time he’d seen an analog clock in real life. Back on Earth in 2106, you had to go to a museum to see one.

After a quick mental calculation, he determined that each Day and Night would last about 6 hours, but he couldn’t figure out what time either one ended. He would have to wait to find out.

‘Now, what should I do? I’ve got all day to keep myself busy.’ Jake exclaimed after spinning around in circles for a few minutes.

One of his findings from testing the door and walls was that they were virtually indestructible. Even a full-powered punch left only a tiny one-millimeter indentation in the wood of the door.

[Rest, train, plan a strategy, explore the village or the woods?] Xi listed loosely. After all, you’re supposed to be a Forest Warden. You might as well get a feel for your role. Who knows, it might make a difference.]

‘Then, let’s do that. We’ll think about the strategy on the way.’

He then found the key to his house in a drawer, which he used to lock behind him. He also retrieved the map, the cutlass and the bow that he felt might be useful.

Once outside, he spaced out watching the sky, wondering how the others were doing. He was praying that none of them had picked up the Monster Role. Except for Kevin, who already looked like one, it would most likely spell doom for them.