

# The Oracle Paths

## Volume 4: The Purgatory

### Chapter 417 – A Long Night

Jake entered his house, then mentally counted the seconds until five minutes had passed. The robotic voice didn't come back and he assumed that the Night Cycle had indeed begun.

Jake peeked out the window and was able to ascertain that it was indeed pitch black outside. As he did so, the robotic voice sounded again, this time exclusively in his head. Startled, he almost drew his weapon before changing his mind.

[Attention, the Villagers terrorized by the Monsters are hiding in their homes. The shutters and doors are closed so as not to attract the Monsters' attention. Any breach of the rules will be punished by a stay in the Pit.]

'Fuck. ' Jake cursed in a foul mood.

He had hoped to watch the Monsters' arrival by looking out the window, but it seemed that the organizer of this Purgatory had left no blind spots.

Spurred on by a sudden idea, he tried to look through the walls with his Myrtharian Sight, but his face quickly darkened when he realized that these so-called rudimentary wood and stone walls were even denser than lead. Dense enough, at least, to make him completely blind.

[Even if you were able to do this, a new rule would probably be enacted to prohibit this kind of skill.] Xi consoled him gently. [It is likely, however, that a Role or Card exists that allows you to spy through your window.]

‘I think so too. ‘Jake nodded, the unpleasant surprise behind him. ‘Now, what should I do?’

[How should I know? I’m afraid you’ll have to wait until morning.] Xi suggested lamely.

‘I almost envy those who are going to be attacked tonight by the Monsters...‘

Restless, Jake paced back and forth in his living room with no light save the hypnotic flame of a candle lit with his forefinger. His house being the most eastern of the village, it was also one of the most isolated.

Not that it would have made much difference. Obviously, the runes on the walls were also blocking out all sound from outside.

‘Hey Xi?’ Jake probed again after a few minutes of silence.

[Yul?] Svufrljuzut ovufhfiidfaovdpiiw.

‘Would you mind appearing next to me? I’m bored.’

[... Sure.]

The hologram of a perfect figure wearing tight-fitting black jade armor materialized in front of him with a slightly moved expression. She was as beautiful as ever, her red and black eyes never leaving him indifferent. Her veins gave off a ruby glow under her skin, but unlike Jake this feature was permanent.

Even her tiny scales, barely discernible with his high Perception, were a jewel of perfection, matching the craftsmanship of the best jewelers. Jake had no way of verifying what her skin would feel like if she had a body, but he was pretty sure it would be as smooth and silky to the touch as he imagined.

With their consciousnesses linked, he could feel the subtle melancholy and sadness that seemed to permanently afflict her. Most of the time she managed to keep her thoughts to herself, but sometimes when she slackened off he could catch a fleeting glimpse.

‘Do memories of your old life ever come back to you?’ Jake asked suddenly out of the blues.

With no way to duck inside his skull, Xi’s hologram was flustered, changing her expression a few times before answering with uncertainty,

‘A few. But they are not happy memories. The appearance I have now is inspired by someone I cared about, but I can’t tell who it was. Maybe it was just me looking in the mirror and I recalled it, or maybe it was an old friend or sibling. What I do know for sure is that it was a very long time ago.’

‘When you say a long time ago, is it a few years or much longer?’ Jake bounced off her last point. She had never told him how old the real Xi was.

‘A very long time. When the Digestors attacked my world and my planet joined the Mirror Universe, there was only System A. I guess you’ve long understood how the Mirror Universe is segmented. The first letter or letters determine a group of 1000 subsystems, identifiable by their own number. Each subsystem can have up to

1000 planets clustered together like B842. Your system ZZ831 is the most recent.

‘On average, a new agglomerated planet like B842 is created every few years, which is often formed from several Seed Worlds or micro-universes with their own laws if you prefer. If the real Xi is still alive, she might be so old it’s hard to conceive. Your brain can’t handle that much data, and neither can my consciousness. The inability to access my memories is not just because your Oracle Rank is too low. It’s also because we wouldn’t be able to handle it. ‘

Jake tried to imagine what it would be like to be older than the Big Bang, on top of huge mental stats conferring absolute memory, but he quickly gave up. It was just too far from his reality.

When he remembered that System A1 still existed and that these inconceivably ancient planets were potentially still populated by billions of people as old as Xi, he once more came to grips with his insignificance in this immense universe.

‘If you had your own body, you’d probably be able to destroy this station with a snap of your fingers. If you came to Earth, you’d probably be worshipped as a goddess. ‘Jake teased her enviously.

The beautiful AI smiled demurely, but deep down she enjoyed these kinds of compliments. Yet, she didn’t smile for long and quickly regained her sternness.

‘System A is full of gods, goddesses and other mythical creatures, but don’t get me wrong. It’s not Heaven, it’s Hell. The conflict against the Digestors and other Mirror Universes is on a scale you can’t even fathom. It’s another stratosphere. The Digestors you’ve faced so far wouldn’t even be fit to lick the shoes of a newborn from there.

‘Digestors are a different breed of life than we are, with their own evolutionary tree. Although they may look similar to us, they are completely different. Genetically and Aetherically speaking, you are closer to a Dragon of Entropy from System A1 than the humanoid Rank 4 Digestors you fought.

‘The Digestors you have encountered so far would be the Earth equivalent of protozoan bacteria. As dangerous and versatile as they are, they are disorganized and act only on instinct. Even then, you can already see that from Rank 5 on, the intelligence of some is already comparable to that of humans.

‘Remember this well: Somewhere at the top of their evolutionary tree they have their own ‘humans’ and other civilized species. My memories of these things are veiled in a thick haze, but I can still remember the nightmare they embody. ‘

Xa nfplut gzaudiw, ovur lfat jaov poqmlo ezfsaow,

‘We’re losing the battle, Jake. The deserters are piling up, and so are the traitors. Sooner or later, you’ll have to make your own choices too.’

Jake could sense a kind of desperation in her voice and it affected him greatly. He wanted to comfort her, but there was nothing he could do.

After hearing this, both Xi and Jake were no longer in the mood for further discussion. They fell silent, lost in their own thoughts, but the hologram stayed by his side.

After a few minutes, Jake pulled himself together and decided to dispel those bad thoughts with some training. It was just another way to put this boring night to good use.

Used to it, he inserted a few logs in the chimney to start a fire with his powers, then sat cross-legged inside. This one was just big enough to allow this action.

He then gradually increased the temperature and intensity of the flames by confining the heat inside the fireplace with his telekinesis. He also kept an air inlet for oxygen, and an exhaust for smoke. When he was confident that the chimney and his force fields could withstand the strain, he mobilized his Aether Core to release even more heat.

Soon, the familiar cranial pressure accompanying these intense mental efforts appeared again. As always, Jake conditioned his mind and gritted his teeth for the torture that was to come.

Simultaneously, he tried to absorb the Fluid around him to expand his Fluid Core, but after a few minutes he felt something wrong. His relative calm was about to collapse, and one look at Xi's tantalizing curves awakened urges of a nature and intensity he had never felt before, not even when Sarah had turned him on at the beach.

This was not a simple biological reaction, but an urge for violence and subjugation.

'Jake, are you okay?' Xi opened her eyes, as she noticed his strange behavior.

The flames in the fireplace were so dense around him that Jake was a blur inside, but his golden and silver eyes were beaming like two devil suns, their usual placidity gone.

'Close the pores of your Fluid Core, seek out the Silver metal in your cells and activate the Blue Soul Stone portion.' She ordered.

Still lucid but agitated, Jake shook his head to clear his parasite thoughts and followed Xi's instructions. He instantly returned to his normal state, but kept feeling slightly different.

'So this was the Corruption they were talking about. ' Jake sighed with an expression of realization. 'But I'm afraid it's already too late to avoid it. Xi, did you really not detect anything? '

'Absolutely nothing. The bracelet is not picking up any anomalies. '

Jake mused over everything he knew for a brief moment before declaring,

'From now on, I will only use the Aether from my Aether Core. I can also convert the Aether from it to Fluid if necessary, but it would be better to secure another source. The Fluid Card might be a solution, but that remains to be verified.'

With his mind made up, he extracted the Fluid received as payment from Kewanee earlier in the day and was able to confirm that the energy was indeed pure. In any case, he did not feel any of the adverse effects he had just experienced.

'This is going to be a disaster for the other players. ' Xi said solemnly. 'Too few have an Aether Core in the Third Ordeal. This place could actually turn into a real Purgatory at this rate. Perhaps avoiding the Pit will be a far greater challenge for most than surviving a night by the rules of this game.'

'Well, fućk it. I just hope the others figure it out in time. ' Jake concluded somberly as he resumed his training.

That night, Jake waited in vain for a Monster attack. He continued to train tirelessly with Xi's company to chat and entertain him, until the robotic voice rang out again, heralding the beginning of a new Cycle with some more bad news.

