

The Oracle Paths

Volume 4: The Purgatory

Chapter 424 - First Infraction

Jake did not hold back his voice while making this declaration. The party concerned shriveled in his seat and shuddered in horror as the Myrtharian glared at him with contempt.

‘I, I, I did what I had to do. ‘ Gordon shrieked like a madman before realizing that he had just discredited the serene and cryptic persona he had built in the minds of the natives under his command.

‘Monsters like you are too dangerous and shouldn’t be let loose. I saw what you did to our general! ‘

Jake didn’t know whether to laugh or cry upon hearing this accusation. True, compared to Riveans who were 5 or 6 feet tall, his body type was indeed out of the ordinary. Whether it was his height, claws, fangs or hair color, he was closer to an abomination of nature than he was to the natives.

‘You see! He doesn’t deny it! Soldiers fear not. As long as we let the truth be told, justice will prevail! As terrifying as he may seem, he is only flesh and blood just like us. His skin is not bulletproof and he needs to feed and rest. If we keep voting against him, we’ll eventually get him! ‘

Listening to the Bailiff’s long diatribe, Jake had to admit that this obsequious officer had guts. Or at least a strong survival instinct. And yet, he felt a dull anger rising inside him. What had he done to deserve this ?

Since the beginning of the Round, of the Ordeal itself, he had done nothing but mind his own business, intervening only when a system assignment demanded it of him. The truth was, other than exchanging a passing glance, Jake and this officer had never interacted before this Monster Game.

Under the honeyed officer's exhortations, the forty or so natives under his authority went wild and suddenly found themselves emboldened out of nowhere, but oh so fleetingly.

Acutely irked by the insults he was receiving, Jake discharged a fraction of his Apex Predator Glyph into the plaza, and a murderous aura rippled through the large square. The weaker natives who had not yet activated their Fluid Core immediately shut up as if their mouths had just been stuffed with an egg. As for the other soldiers and Fluid Wielders, they too fell silent, clutching their weapons warily.

The gold medal for the most pathetic performance was undoubtedly given to Gordon Mason, who fainted out of sheer terror on the spot. This incident had far-reaching consequences.

[Contestant Jake Wilderth broke the rules by attacking contestant Gordon Mason at 11:56am during the Cycle Day phase. He will be punished by being sent to the Pit. The sentence will be carried out immediately. If he survives his trial, he will reappear in the central square of the Village in front of the fountain.]

'Damn it!' Jake cursed through his teeth.

The cobblestone floor suddenly cracked open beneath his feet, revealing a bottomless pit. All the spectators held their breath, expecting to see him fall, but it was a very different scene that unfolded before their eyes. Even Peter Brady, who had been on the

receiving end of it twice before, stood up straight in his seat, his eyes almost popping out of his head.

Jake levitated above the abyss with indifference, as if he were treading on a glass floor.

‘Nice try.’ He sneered as he peered into the chasm beneath him.

As if the robotic voice was answering his provocation, it announced flatly:

[Criminal Jake Wilderth refuses to be taken into custody. Initiating enhanced protocol.]

The cobblestone floor then opened further until the entire square became a huge abyss and Jake felt an immense pull dragging him down.

‘Fuck! I won’t go down without a fight.’ Jake roared defiantly.

All the mental energy usually packed into his Spirit Body exploded at once, and he took off like Superman, releasing a supersonic wave comparable to a jet plane.

The runes on the ground handling his capture were caught off guard by this twist, and although the gravitational force intensified, it was unable to counteract his staggering momentum in time. Eventually, the force pulling him down disappeared and the cobblestone floor closed in, releasing a dejected groan from the depths of the Pit.

Tvu zmgmoah smahu tat rmo lmprt fefar, iufsare f loprrut hzmjt jaov qmpovl jatu mnur. Jplo fl jaov Puouz mZ Cvarur, ovu AI fnnufZut om hmrlatuz val dufo fl f lphhulldpi zuopZr dZmq ovu Pao.

Jake landed again a minute later, prodding his toes warily as if the ground might give way again. This time, no one dared to make any comments, not even the other Players. What he had just done was an

impeccable response to a threat that no one understood and more than one participant were already taking notes.

At high noon, an urn appeared in front of the fountain in the very same spot from which Peter Brady had resurfaced from the Pit two days earlier. At that moment, each Villager present took out his or her Fluid Card without regard to the previous incident, and stowed it away a few seconds later.

‘Time to vote...’ Kewanee nudged Jake gently as she saw him remain unresponsive.

‘But how?’

‘Ah, I forgot you were out of town yesterday, you must have missed the announcement. A ‘vote’ tab becomes available in your Fluid Card from noon to 1 pm. Despite your absence yesterday, I thought you still voted.’

‘Well, I didn’t.’ Jake grunted mortified.

If he’d known it was that easy to vote, he wouldn’t have missed it. Accessing the name list of the participants, he unabashedly voted against Gordon, who had encouraged the natives to vote against him. For the two remaining votes, he used the second one for Avros Valruc who had killed Tayyar yesterday and chose to keep the third one blank.

‘Pshht! If you have any votes left, use it against Ostrexora Daemonne.’ Kewanee whispered in his ear as she saw him put away his Fluid Card with a dissatisfied look.

‘Hmm, why?’ Jake asked out of simple curiosity. So far, Kewanee hadn’t seemed like the kind of person to hold grudge.

‘Just trust me. I’ll explain later.’

‘Okay.’

After using his last vote, Jake shut himself up again and waited like everyone else for the ballot result. The fun part was that he hoped Avros would attack him now that his Enforcer status was permanent, but it didn’t happen.

The latter seemed to have been either cowed by his earlier prowess or was simply hatching other plans. To tell the truth, Jake still didn’t know what he looked like. It wasn’t until Kewanee pointed him out that he could finally put a face to the name.

He was taken aback when she singled out a young blond man in his late twenties, rather tanned and athletic with a surfer’s look. His cap, shorts and tee shirt had the Quicksilver logo on them, which made him look like an Earthman despite his strange name.

The Player was quietly eating a sandwich away from the crowd, almost as shunned as Jake and the two women sitting next to him. From time to time, he would throw a teasing wink at the pretty female participants, while he would flick the finger at the other men leering at him a little too insistently.

‘Did he go shopping on New Earth or is he really a pure Earthling like us?’ Jake inquired without hiding his skepticism.

‘I managed to talk to him a bit...’ The young Native American woman snorted dismissively. ‘He’s Australian and he makes zero effort to fit in. He’s exactly what you’d expect from his attitude. Apart from local English he speaks no other language. He’s a loner and let’s say it, a fućking àsshole. His actual name is probably a fake.’

Jake scanned the Australian one last time before losing interest. If this guy wanted to come after him, he was free to try.

The hour passed without any twists and turns except for some name-calling and the indignant cries of Susan who had been groped again. Apparently, this was not considered an offense by the game's AI, which made it extremely difficult for her to fend off her ever-growing number of stalkers. The Butcheress had proven she had plenty of fight in her, but if she fought back too hard, she would be the one to end up in the Pit.

Jake didn't step in to give her a hand either. Everyone had their own share of trouble to deal with and there were plenty of ways to get around these rules to make them pay.

[The noon vote took place in the Village Square. The villagers present voted against Jake Wilderth, Kewanee and Svara, suspecting them of being Monsters. Please choose three new Enforcers. Avros Valruc retains his Role.]

Listening to the robotic voice's announcement, Jake showed no emotion, but he couldn't say the same for Kewanee.

'Is it because I'm hanging out with you?' The Native American woman exhaled with a deep sense of injustice.

'Exactly!' A soldier shook his head with pity. Jake recognized him as Carl, the Confessor.

'Too bad it's too late. If you had agreed to reveal your first Role, we could have avoided all this. What a shame...'

Jake remembered that the Confessor could indeed ask for a Villager's first Role each new Cycle. He could do this privately or publicly, but the interviewee could not lie.

Carl could indeed have removed them from suspicion, but Jake didn't fall for his little game. He had plenty of time to question them when

they arrived, but he didn't. After all, he too was a native under Gordon's jurisdiction.

Jake didn't have to invent an answer, as the urn showed up again for the second vote. This time he voted for himself, Kewanee and Svava, who was the only one not present.

Unsurprisingly, his efforts failed and three more Enforcers were announced. However, the result turned out to be different from what he had imagined.