

The Oracle Paths

Volume 4: The Purgatory

Chapter 426 - Burning Meal

Once the door closed and locked, the racket outside disappeared. Gone were the cooing of birds, or the chirping of cicadas, or even the rustling of the wind. Even if a nuke were to hit the house next to them, they probably wouldn't hear anything.

Instead, a different kind of ruckus ensued. Jake had excellent Perception, so her heartbeat and quiet breathing compounded his own, pounding in his ears like a relentless drum.

It was all the more distressing because unlike normal humans, both of them had an unusual metabolism. Instead of the usual 60 heartbeats per minute at rest in a normal human, which could drop below 30 in highly trained endurance athletes, Jake's heart was only beating once or twice a minute. As for the young woman, it didn't go beyond five.

When it came to breathing, the difference was even more extreme. Jake only took a shallow breath once every two or three minutes. Carmin breathed only slightly more often, her chest rising imperceptibly from time to time.

So why was Jake going on about a ruckus? Simply, because every time he started to relax, a heartbeat, an inhale or simply a shift in the young woman's position was enough to break his concentration.

Of course, he was not so easy to distract, but it happened that the woman under his protection was gorgeous, probably the hottest he had ever met, and he was just a little too aware of her presence.

Add to that, the intoxicating fragrance accompanying her wherever she went, and it didn't take much to throw off a hardened bachelor like Jake. The fact that neither of them took the slightest initiative to break this silence made their cohabitation even more awkward.

Jake's house had only one room with a tiny bathroom. The bed, kitchen and dining table were all in the same room, which inevitably forced them to rub shoulders. There was no privacy. Even the bed was only big enough for one person.

So they kept staring into each other's eyes for a long half hour, each sitting on one of the few pine stools that furnished his house. Neither of them admitted defeat.

While Jake was clearly too bulky for the tiny stools and extremely uncomfortable, Carmin stood on hers in an extremely prim manner, one leg resting on the other like a refined lady applying her etiquette lessons to the letter.

Jake had all the time to lose himself in her spellbinding ruby irises and her blood red lips. From time to time, the young woman would nibble on her lip or run her hand through her hair while slightly flexing her chest. He then had a first-class view on her vertiginous cleavage.

At these moments, Jake was glad that his first Coaching Mission had been to overcome his fear of eyecontact. Come to think of it, it had been a long time since the Coaching feature had sent him a training program or even a personal development mission.

To be honest, he had almost forgotten that this feature existed. Between the Ordeals and the Oracle's unpredictability, Jake had finally grown out of it.

In addition to her exceptional beauty, Jake also became acutely aware once again of her extreme pallor, abnormally low body temperature, dark circles, and subtly parched skin to the trained eye.

‘Do you want something to eat or drink?’ Jake blurted out when the young woman smiled politely at him after catching him red-handed leering at her cleavage.

After hearing his question, Carmin regained some steam and reflexively licked her cracked lips before answering against all odds, ‘I’ll be fine. I have a delicate digestive system and I’m afraid the food served here will be lethal to me.’

Jake followed her envious glance toward the fruit-filled bowl before seeing her shake her head ruefully. ‘What’s the matter with this chick? If she’s hungry, can’t she eat like everyone else?’

Unable to bear the suffocating tension, Jake suddenly stood up, pretended to stretch and decided to pretend she wasn’t there. As usual, he snapped his fingers to light a blaze in the fireplace and threw in a few logs to fuel it.

Without bothering Carmin, he entered the fireplace as if it were nothing and sat down cross-legged in the middle of the flames. Soon he heard only the crackling of the flames licking his face and he managed to enter into meditation, effectively cutting himself off from the rest of the world.

Carmin’s dull eyes flashed into focus as he lit the fire, and they widened fully as he stepped into the flames. Unnoticed by Jake, her face showed signs of wavering.

In his bubble, Jake continued to think about how to fight the Corruption. Xi had been very clear: It was unstoppable and

undefendable. The closest analogy was that of an ink stain falling into water. Once the ink mixed with the rest of the liquid, it was impossible to get rid of it by conventional means.

The same was true for sugar water or any other homogeneous mixture. Of course, science had found more or less complex methods of reversing some of these reactions, but there were also irreversible reactions.

Despite Xi's persuasion, Jake was still a logician. The word impossible was not in his vocabulary. There were just things that were not yet understood. It was by striving to answer these unanswerable questions that science and knowledge progressed step by step.

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Using the analogy of the ink stain in the glass of water, his master plan could be summarized in two words: More Water.

It was, unglamorously, the most popular method used by unscrupulous companies to get rid of their waste. The oceans being so vast, wastewater and toxic products had been dumped into them for decades before any visible impact was seen.

Jake was aware that this method was far from perfect, but it was a viable way to save time. The water in his case was his Spirit Body and Soul.

Even after all this time practicing, it was still unclear to him what the difference was between the two. What he did know was that where his conscience was, his soul was certainly there.

That was why he had been injured and suffered temporary headaches and amnesia after clashing with his Spirit Body against mental attacks at the end of his Second Ordeal. Conversely, it was also why he had not suffered at all when he had cut off a piece of his Spirit Body to create the permanent Aether Spells that made up the ‘Sun’ of his Floating Island.

Now he had to figure out how to grow his Spirit Body as fast as possible at a speed that rivaled the Corruption’s expansion. Jake rarely checked his Skill Status, but this time he took a moment to do so.

[Meditation: 97 points (Novice): You have received no systemic training in this area, but by combining your knowledge with the guidelines of the Coaching Feature you have achieved a decent level of expertise. You can calm down, exercise and slightly increase some of your cognitive faculties through regular practice.]

Considering that his Cyber Engineering degree only peaked at 51 points when he acquired the bracelet, his 97 points in Meditation practically put him on the level of a Tibetan monk in seclusion since childhood. The reason why such a staggering progression was possible was his inconceivable cognitive stats.

To be exact, all of his skills without exception had a similar progression pattern. Whether it was his Swordsmanship, Close Combat, and even Cyber Engineering, all of these skills exceeded 75 points even when he hadn’t practiced them for a long time.

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But now, he was forced to abandon his original plan.

'I need to grow this Meditation Skill.' Jake concluded dispassionately. Since the 'Novice' mark was clearly readable, there was no doubt that this one had a huge amount of room for improvement.

Until now, he had practiced mediation like an earthling, without including any overly sophisticated Aether Spell or Control. It was time to step up a gear!

Just as Jake's mind was reaching enlightenment, his dreams of grandeur burst like a soap bubble over a candle flame. Abruptly snapping out of his trance, he suddenly felt immense danger.

'What's going on? Why can't I move?' Jake tried to open his eyes but could not.

Reaching out, he realized what had alerted him. He could no longer hear the crackling of the flames.

'Did someone put out the fire? Carmin? Or a Monster?'

[You were poisoned.] Xi informed him in exasperation.

'Thanks, I know.' Jake grunted, feeling slightly guilty. 'Not a big deal.'

Jplo fdouz ovfo lofouquro, vu duio lmquovare lmdo frt lypalvw nzull val čvèlo. Tvur, lmquovare lvfzn oahciut ovu zaevo latu md val ovzmfo. Hu duio f juo, liaevoiw hmit mzefr ħčcīrġ ovu lèrlōisè fzuf zunufoutiw frt dfz dzmq oaoaiifoare vaq, ao fzmplut val daevoare lnazao.

Stimulating his eye nerves with his Strength, Constitution and Intelligence Aether, Jake forced his heavy eyelids open. Looking down, he locked onto a long, recognizable brown mane that could only belong to one person: Carmine.

‘The fuçk... are... you... doing?’ Jake enunciated with difficulty in an icy tone.

Carmin shivered at the sound of his voice, not expecting him to wake up so soon. Feeling her meal slipping away, she stopped playing with her prey and immediately sank her fangs in, clenching her jaw with all her might.

Hungry for several days, she felt a small climax of anticipation at the prospect of fresh blood flooding her mouth soon. Except that she waited, waited patiently, but the so much awaited ecstasy never came.

After about ten seconds, she realized that her fangs had not managed to completely cross the barrier of his skin. And underneath, a layer of muscles as hard as titanium fibers still separated her from the precious carotid artery.

‘Damn it!’ She gnashed her teeth.

Mobilizing her Aether, she finally managed to sink her fangs and a tiny drop of blood grazed the tip of her tongue. Alas, her joy was short-lived.

The next second, Jake’s temperature soared and the bårèly visible vein network formed a distinctive lava mesh. The second drop of blood Carmin ingested proved to be very different from the first.

Her tongue instantly melted in her mouth and a searing pain seared the roof of her mouth.

‘Aargh!’

The next thing she knew, she was rolling on the floor with her hands over her throat, spitting out cauterized blood.