

The Oracle Paths

Volume 4: The Purgatory

Chapter 446 - True Will

[Look at your Ordeal Missions. I'm afraid you got carried away for nothing] Xi remarked patronizingly, but also pityingly.

Jake accessed the interface and sighed guiltily at the roster of people under his protection. All the natives were dead, including Gordon and Carl. The latter's respect for the Inquisitors had apparently not been enough to redeem his life. Their greyed-out names left no room for ambiguity.

On the other hand, and this was what made him regret his outburst, Will and the other Players had somehow made it through. Arryl's and Will's dead bodies that he had witnessed on the way back were probably just illusions induced by Isbeus' barrier.

He tried to replay those last memories before impact, but he failed to find the slightest flaw that could have helped him to prevent this. His visual memory was practically photographic, so he could already conclude that this female Grandmaster's illusions were at least two notches above Daryl's.

May his bastard soul rest in peace. By now, his remains were probably feeding the lake's fish. He'd done something stupid, but at least he'd gotten rid of that scumbag. Not such a bad outcome all in all.

He reached the destroyed Village in no time, but forced himself to stay submerged until he was out of breath before resurfacing. If the

Inquisitors did not find his body, it was a safe bet that the Village would be their next destination.

And indeed, he had made the right choice. Croyorn and Oxium flew over the Village soon after. With his Myrtharian Sight, he saw them patrolling in a circle twice around the smoldering rubble, then after an exchange of glances they shrugged and wafted away.

‘Ugh, finally gone!’ Jake cursed after taking a deep breath of fresh air.

‘We could have fought them Master.’ The Fluid Ghost said in disappointment. Since he had died, he seemed to have lost some basic human emotions, like fear.

Unless, he had died precisely because his self-preservation instinct had always been non-existent? It was worth looking into.

Regardless, now that the old ghost was with him, he could now enjoy a crash course. To find Will and the others, he learned to listen to what the veteran Fluid Wielders called ‘the Fluid Whisper’.

Of course, the Fluid couldn’t actually talk, but that was how the Fluid Wielders described the feeling they experienced when they felt that elusive sense of omniscience. Usually it was only at the Fluid Master rank that this precognition became accurate, but he was currently very close to that level. At least, his Spirit Body and Extrasensory Perception had long since crossed that threshold.

[Don’t forget about Corruption] Xi said for the umpteenth time.

[Every time you open your senses and connect with the surrounding Fluid, you accelerate its spread.]

‘I know, but I’ve changed my mind.’ Jake said, clenching his fists in rage. His heart was screaming for blood. ‘I can be careful and delay

the Corruption's advance, but what if the Round drags on? What if there's a third one after that, and then another again?

'Let's be honest. Unless I can find a way to double my Spirit Body level every 10 days, I only give myself a week before I lose it. Sorry, but I should as well embrace it.'

Hu duio vuz talfnnzmsfi, gpo lvu cruj ovuzu jfl lmqu ozpov ar val jmztl.

[I won't try to change your mind again, but consider the Corruption from a different angle.] Xi compromised, though she did not hide her concern. [Let's say you win this Ordeal, but in order to do so you end up murdering, torturing, raping, and betraying everyone you care about, allies and enemies alike, the innocent as well as the wicked. Will you still be able to look at yourself in the mirror after that? Maybe the Oracle can heal your mind, but can it undo the evil you've done?]

Jake's face twitched. He was a man first and foremost. Before civilization, some cruel behavior that modern society would consider sinful was commonplace and sometimes even looked up to. Even monkeys and dolphins were capable of perpetrating the worst atrocities within their own communities if allowed to act in accordance with their nature.

Although he was convinced that he would never lay a hand on a woman against her will or betray his friends, could he really be so sure of that?

From the beginning, Xi had repeatedly warned him about the malevolent nature of this Corruption. If it merely disinhibited them and exacerbated their emotions, it didn't deserve to be called evil. At worst, it would have been labeled as dangerous.

If so, what was his AI really fearing? Was his personality really so fickle that anything could mess it up? Fucking no.

‘I am a Myrtharian. I will not lose to myself. I will win, without perjuring myself.’ Jake finally declared as a promise to himself.

As these words left his mouth, his resolve sparked to life and he felt something change within him. The Aether Runes of his Silver Myrtharian Bloodline began to shimmer forth from an immeasurably small point lodged in the very core of his Spirit Body.

Without him doing anything, the Runes’ glow spread to his entire Spirit Body, and then his physical body. His muscles and skin began to radiate like a mini sun, in a way not dissimilar to his Berserk mode.

Before he could even understand what was happening to him, everything stopped. If the sand of the shore under his feet had not vitrified, he could have believed he had imagined it.

Fuuiare rm tadduzuro ovfr gudmzu, vu hvuhcut val Bimmtiaru Sofopl, gpo usuzwovare fnnufzut rmzqfi. Hmjusuz, jvur vu hvuhcut val lofol, vu dmprrt f ruj ardmzqfoamr hfouemzaxut prtuz val Smpi Sofopl:

[True Will: 1 point.]

Jake froze for a long minute as he read this, somewhat bewildered. Until now, he had always considered Willpower to be a subattribute of Intelligence. And that was still the case.

Willpower was a very subjective concept. It depended very much on personality and many scientists even considered that it did not exist, or at least that it was very limited. Depending on the pleasure felt, the stakes, or the urgency of the task, even a person considered lazy could suddenly become a workaholic.

So what did Willpower and True Will mean? Willpower, as he understood it, was his mental resilience and self-control. In medical terms, it was his rational prefrontal cortex dominating over his limbic, emotional brain.

He could always decide to slack off or run away from his chores and duties, but with a high Willpower Stat he would not give up easily, nor would he break down in front of an overwhelming task.

In that case, what was the purpose of this True Will Stat?

[It's Pure Mental Force. All your values, your determination and everything else that defines you such as your Aether Code, condensed into an indestructible particle of energy. Even if your body and Spirit Body were to fall apart, this spark of True Will would remain as the last barrier shielding your Soul]. Xi explained with awe and reverence.

[Evolvers and high-level Aetherists can condense their True Will to perform all sorts of miracles. Awakening one's Will is an absolute prerequisite for becoming an Oracle Guardian.]

'If it's a prerequisite to becoming an Oracle Guardian, then why are you so emotional?' Jake couldn't help but ask.

[Because True Will is usually condensed around the 5th or 6th Ordeal, and only by the most talented. It is estimated that it requires a Willpower sub-attribute of over 10,000 points, as well as a Spirit Body level above 25. Even with these requirements, it's not always enough. Sorry for my lack of faith Jake, but no matter how good you are, this shouldn't have happened now.]

Jake didn't take offense. He dismissed all possible hypotheses before isolating a plausible explanation. The only one, to be honest: the Silver Alloy in his cells.

The result of the Red, Blue and Green Soul Stones fusion he had ingested during his Second Ordeal. Its only effect so far had been to change his bloodline's name to Silver Myrtharian, to harmonize his figure and to optimize the growth of his cognitive stats.

'That's all well and good, but how do I use it?' Jake suddenly realized that this happy event wasn't helping him much.

[No idea.] Xi sheepishly apologized. [You awakened it too soon. My memory of this faculty is still hazy. But now I have a little more confidence in you for this Ordeal.]

She paused for a moment, then added weakly,

[Crush them all.]

Jake smiled as he heard her heartfelt encouragement.

'I will.'

A few minutes later, he found Will and the others at the edge of the Forest. They were alive and well, but it had been a close call.

Will was ironically unharmed, but Tim had taken a big hit. When he saw the kid looking like a pincushion with nine arrows sticking out of his chest, he realized it was the first time he'd ever seen him injured. Fortunately, his armor had prevented the arrows from going in too deep.

The others had taken a few stray bullets or arrows, but no vital organs had been harmed. They were now resting against the trees, their wounds neatly bandaged. Drastan, the only one with Will who had escaped completely unscathed, was standing guard.

'You are alive.' Enya hugged him when she saw him approach. 'We saw you fall into the lake after you smashed into that fence...'

‘Speak frankly. ‘ Jake chuckled. ‘You saw my head go so deep into my chest that you wonder why my chin doesn’t smell like my asshole, right? Don’t worry, it takes more than that to kill me.

‘It’s time for payback. ‘