

The Oracle Paths

Volume 4: The Purgatory

Chapter 471 - First Victim

A few minutes later Jake slowed down as the new light arrow shot to the ground below them. Following the arrow's path laid out for them, the group began their descent, quickly breaking through the layer of artificial clouds to discover a new Village, this time quite different from the Inuit Village they had just visited.

This Village was intact, but desolate. In the far north of the map, the usual Forest, Lake, and Mountain were present, but where the neighboring Villages should have been, there was nothing but more Forest and more Lake.

That no lights or torches were lit was not unexpected, but the dead silence was somewhat unnatural. It wasn't just because it was night and the Villagers were sleeping. Nor was it because its former Villagers had fled the place after an attack.

Considering the overgrown fields and gardens and the immaculate homes, this place had simply never been inhabited. And that made it all the more suspicious.

On alert, Jake and the others set foot on land noiselessly, warily scanning the buildings around them. All the shutters were closed and every item was untouched, though it was best not to jump to conclusions.

Pulling out the Purgatory replica again, Jake waited for the local runes to be assimilated before generating a new light arrow. When it

appeared, it pointed someplace straight ahead of them, but still downward.

The problem was that, as far as he knew, there were no basements or underground passages in these Villages. The Castle's dungeons were the only facilities below ground level and the direction indicated by the arrow was pointing the opposite way.

In fact, they were headed for the Village's central square. Cautious, they quickly crossed the distance to the amphitheater structure where the past votes had taken place.

Since the start of Round Two, the relaxation of the rules and the rapid spread of the Corruption, the daily vote had pretty much gone out the window. No Lord wanted to lose his Villagers. Aside from ensuring compliance, these votes served only as a deterrent.

Vigilantly, Jake crouched down, placing a hand on the ground precisely where the arrow had fallen. As he feared, it was pointing downward, inviting them to dig in to continue their adventure.

When his hand touched one of the cobblestones that littered the ground, Jake's expression did not change, but the Fluid Ghost hidden inside him took the opportunity to sneak through.

Apart from Ostrexora, who followed the ghost's movements with her eyes, only Hephais and Mihangyl felt its presence clearly. The others with decent mental stats like the two sisters or Carmin felt an abnormality, but to preserve their minds they had retracted their Spirit Body, weakening their senses accordingly.

Only Ralnor, Kyle, Tim and Peter did not notice anything, but they did take note of their comrade's change of expression. Nevertheless, it was coming from Jake and they had nothing to fear from him at the

moment. At least, Ostrexora's ectoplasmic figure intimidated them much more.

Jake was waiting calmly for his bracelet to return when he received bad news from Xi. He closed his eyes for a second to digest the information, but quickly adjusted to the new reality.

'Seren is dead.' Jake calmly informed Carmin, giving her a serious look.

The vampire freaked out for a fleeting moment, but the rabid hunger clouding her beautiful face quickly took over. Drawing a sharp breath, she chugged down another blood vial.

The others didn't know who this Seren was, but from Jake and Carmin's reaction, they suspected that it didn't bode well. Sensing their questioning, Jake clarified briefly,

'Our mole at Wyatt's, the leader of one of the two big Monster Villages.'

No one commented, but a glimmer of understanding lit up the faces of Kyle, Peter, Mihangyl and Ralnor. Kyle remembered the vampire because of Sarah's betrayal, Peter had investigated them thoroughly, while the two Egaeans had met him in the command room of the Titan Pearl.

All of a sudden, Kyle drew his sword and parried in extremis a powerful stroke from Ralnor.

'The hell, man?!' The former Playboy howled in rage.

Ralnor chuckled evilly in response, an aura of red flame similar to the two sisters' enveloping his body and extending to his claymore. The tense but serene atmosphere within the group suddenly cracked and everyone scrambled backwards, distancing themselves.

‘Tsk, he lost it.’ Mihangyl sneered as he beheld his old friend turn into a raging beast.

Stamping down hard, a wave of emerald light spread through the ground from his body. The group didn’t notice anything special, but vines grew at a prodigious rate around Ralnor, cracking and splitting the cobblestone floor. Within seconds, Ralnor was immobilized.

His red flames licked at the still-green vines, but their water content seemed high enough to fend off immediate incineration. Indifferent to his efforts, they continued to sprout until buds and then huge purple flowers with six yellow-speckled petals bloomed.

At that moment, a soothing sweet smell reached their nostrils despite the distance between them and Ralnor. The toxin was so pervasive that those with the lowest Constitution felt their legs go limp and their minds foggy. Kyle and Tim increased the distance another notch, while the two sisters produced a flame screen to clear the air around them.

There was one moron among them who did exactly the opposite. Like a moth drawn to the brightness of fire, Peter started stumbling like a zombie towards the poisonous flowers with an intoxicated expression on his face.

‘Drugs...’ Jake heard him babble repeatedly.

Fortunately, Mihangyl retracted his spell before giving him satisfaction. At the epicenter of the sweet gas, Ralnor’s frenzied fit ended abruptly, and a forlorn expression appeared on his face. Alas, like Carmin, his remorse did not last long, and his warlike *désiré* soon recurred.

Meanwhile, the Old Ghost had finished his scouting tour. Reaching back through Jake's hand and into his body, he confirmed their doubts.

'The Purgatory Fluid Artifact is far below us, deep in the Pit.' Jake reported back to the group looking for guidance. 'Another issue is that the artifact is constantly moving. Its area stays the same, but in the Pit a difference of a few feet could send us into a completely different room. The spatial laws here don't follow conventional logic.'

'We have a bigger problem.' Hephais scowled. 'How do we break the rules here?'

Everyone put on a grim face when they heard this. This was quite a predicament. Because they all had the Traveler Role, they could walk anywhere, and because this was not their Village, whatever they did here would not be punished.

The only solution left was to attack each other.

Jake was automatically disqualified, since as Lord, he set the rules for his own Village. Kyle was a Night Baron from another Village and was therefore also excluded. Mihangyl and Ralnor were from the same Village and would probably refuse to sacrifice themselves.

So it remained to be decided who of Peter, Enya, Esya, Tim, Ostrexora or Hephais would break the rules and how.

'Ostrexora, I know you are capable of surrendering and escaping the Pit on your own. Why don't you show us how you do it?' Jake suggested with a devilish glint in his eyes.

The half-woman-half-ghost Player snorted dismissively in response.

'Just because I went there doesn't mean it was easy.' She retorted icily. 'Anyone can go in using their Spirit Body, but it's still a

violation of the rules. I was punished severely for that. Don't underestimate the Pit. It's a Purgatory, not a resort. If the first sentence doesn't hit home, the next time will start to target your weaknesses not to mention the elevated difficulty that goes along with it. I've been there three times already and that's three times too many.'

'Cough, I can confirm her statement...' Peter grimaced with a pale face, 'The first two times were okay, but the third time came really close to killing me. The fourth time will probably succeed.'

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'Let me put some lead in your brain.' Jake growled in a low voice. 'No matter who breaks the rules, if you follow that person into the Pit you will be punished too. Whatever crap you've overcome down below, what we will meet this time together will be ten times worse. We want to win and I'll do anything to win, but some of us will probably die, maybe all of us if we fail. If any of you want to give up, it's now or never?'

Ostrexora gave him a murderous look, but she simply humphed without disagreeing with him. Peter merely shrugged as a way of letting go.

'Let's be honest.' Jake resumed more gently this time. 'Carmin, Ralnor and Peter, you're the three closest to go bonkers among us. In the case of Ralnor and Carmin, it would have happened already if we hadn't arranged countermeasures. If someone sacrifices themselves in your place, don't make them regret their choice.'

The three concerned wore stony expressions as they listened to his criticism. Ralnor remained silent, his true emotions hard to pin down

behind his veil of madness, but Carmin jingled the vials still full of blood in his face to show him that she still had some room left before losing her mind.

In the end, it was Peter who heaved a tired, defeated sigh. The sense of urgency, his withdrawal symptoms and the Corruption had consumed his last bit of fortitude.

‘Fine. Let me do it. Just... Whatever, I’ll drug myself to death once I’m back on B842...‘