

The Oracle Paths

Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

Chapter 338 – We're Even Now

Needless to say, it wasn't mere complacency that gave Jake such a sense of contentment. Even if he failed and died in the end, it didn't really matter. What mattered was that he outlived them.

At that point, no matter what bullshit he told them back on B842, they would be forced to take his word for it or torture their minds sorting out the true from the false. Either way, it was a great victory for Jake.

'This time we're trying to stay together. 'Jake warned them in earnest, gauging their attitude with the corner of his eye.

Despite his *désiré* to believe them, the fact that they had been exempted from the previous trap, unlike him and his cousins, unfortunately called for mistrust. As long as he had not found the reason for this, he would be on his guard, although their sincerity remained as likely a hypothesis as any other.

'Stay close to me, Enya. 'Hakkrasha suddenly spoke in a deep and ancient voice. 'I cannot protect you both this time.'

Jake stiffened briefly as he understood that the alien was referring to him indirectly. His queries and doubts had been resolved. Regrettably, Hakkrasha's statement had just sealed Will's fate.

The businessman had an enlightened face, but it was soon replaced by a fatalistic expression. At each Ordeal's end, his luck seemed to desert him at the most crucial moment. With the appearance of Jake and Hakkrasha, he had thought he could persist longer, but his dreams of glory had just been nipped in the bud.

Aware of Will's plight, Jake succinctly advised him to overclock his Aether stats by sacrificing a few Aether points. His comrade was unfamiliar with the procedure, and his Spirit Body unfortunately didn't have the same resilience as Jake's or Enya's, but he carried out his instructions as best he could. He was well aware that he no longer had a choice.

Enya decided to follow suit and her Aether control proved to be much better than Will's. At least she had overloaded her Aether stats by about 80%. The businessman was struggling to get over 60%. Past that point, the Aether would leak out of him like a barrel filled with holes.

Seeing how Will was struggling to contain and manipulate the Aether excess, Jake couldn't help but scold him including Enya in his admonitions. Even before acquiring his Myrtharian bloodline, he was not struggling as much as they were.

' Serves you right for neglecting your training. 'He chided them with exasperation. 'Now you can understand why I spent so much time working on my Aether Core.'

Will was ashamed, but he knew he was the one at fault. Besides, he wanted to become a rich tycoon on B842, and ultimately the whole Mirror Universe. Becoming an invincible god had never been his first aspiration. He would willingly leave that kind of ambitious goal to tireless monsters like Jake.

While Will familiarized himself with his new abilities and the headache with which Jake had long been familiar, Hakkrasha entered the Red Soul Spell domain alone and Enya jogged after him, throwing a guilty smile at them.

Even though they were all friends, she would have been foolish to abandon Hakkrasha after all the help he had given her. She more or less understood the alien's character. Very generous, but only when it didn't directly affect his own plans. Fortunately, the Jakam's most ambitious goal seemed to be sleeping on a full stomach.

Ir frw hflu, vuinare mruluid Qufro vuinare ovu jvmiu oufQ. Bw guhmQare lozmreuz frt euooare guoouz zujfztl, lvu jmpit Qmzu uflaiw gu fgiu om hmQnurlfou vuz lalouz frt usuropfiiw Waii.

Once Hakkrasha and Enya on his heels walked through the door of the second hall without showing any sign of transformation, Will had an envious expression, but he no longer seemed to be in pain. The Aether had also stopped leaking out of his body, his Aether stats stabilizing at about 162 points.

Compared to Jake it was insignificant, but for the thirty-year-old man it was an astounding power-up. The intelligence gain alone could make anyone's head spin.

'Should I have used my Charisma on Hakkrasha?' Jake listened to him grumble quietly, but he pretended he didn't hear anything.

With his upgraded Aether Vision, he had no trouble discerning the strange Aether flow running through Will's body. It was very similar to the Zhorion Priest's method of crowd control, but he had the decency to hold it inside. The moral difference between the two individuals was clear to see.

Instead of letting Will wallow in self-pity, Jake calmly nudged him forward. Passing the boundary line carved on the floor, the businessman's behavior changed drastically.

His aura became anarchic and tinged with wrath in a flash, while his look... remained the same or almost the same. The 'Homo Sapiens' bloodline was as crappy as it sounded. The Aetheric Code of the Earthlings, human or not, was as blank as it could be.

There was no hidden potential, no Aetheric Code to amplify. Except for a slight gain in strength and a slight increase in his size and musculature, Will hadn't changed much. Therefore, he wasn't burning that much energy to maintain this Berserk state.

‘Oh, I guess it’s not all downsides to being human.’ Jake commented with a sense of wonder.

Under the effect of the same Soul Spell, he would have turned into a terrifying demon, but under optimistic circumstances he would only have had a few minutes or hours left to live after that.

‘Don’t.’ Jake stretched out his arm, resting his palm against Will’s forehead to prevent the raving lunatic from attacking him.

Stupidly growling like a ferocious beast with drool on his lips, his fists were flailing in the air as he missed Jake by more than three inches. With his reach advantage, keeping Will at a distance was effortless.

George and Brice watched this ridiculous show not knowing whether to laugh or cry, but they refrained from making any inappropriate remarks. If his cousin got ticked off, only God knew what he would do. He was actually able to nail them directly onto the Soul Spell device and let them rot in the general indifference.

Not giving a damn about his two cousins, Jake cast an ultraviolet beam from his palm positioned over Will’s forehead and his friend momentarily stopped swinging his fists around. The businessman was still in his Berserk state, but the overall Soul Spell intensity had at least halved. That was enough to restore a semblance of lucidity to him.

‘Thank you Jake...’ Will said, clenching his teeth to prevent himself from growling like an animal.

Jake came to realize that he had unconsciously ruled out ultraviolet radiation as one of his options when he had fallen into the previous trap. This was a mistake. That the illusion was affecting him didn’t mean that his ultraviolet radiation had no effect on it.

George also seemed able to shoot light through his scales. If this light extended to the ultraviolet spectrum, it might explain how he had overcome the illusions. However, this was probably not enough for what was to follow or someone so arrogant would not have retreated with his tail between his legs...

Yet, when Jake brought Will out of his frenzy with his ultraviolet rays, George and Brice showed a very subtle change in expression. This ability was something they had not anticipated.

‘Wait!’ George shouted as he saw Jake increase the radiation output.

Brice did not utter a word, but his eyes widened fully as if he did not want to miss a single detail of the next scene. George facepalmed himself when he saw that he had been ignored and watched Jake pay the price for his madness.

Indeed, when the radiation intensified to the point that a good sunscreen would no longer have been enough to save them, the reddish gem embedded in the device’s socket struck back with an even brighter light that penetrated through the ultraviolet radiation released from his body as if it was not there.

Will was miraculously spared, but the Red Soul Spell beam focused on Jake like a spiritual laser and the multiple mental barriers protecting his lucidity exploded almost instantly.

‘Holy Shit!’ Will cursed before performing his best dash to the door which was only a few meters away.

‘Guh’ Jake’s body grew instantly by one meter and the temperature inside the room soared by a hundred degrees, while the ground under his feet liquefied, forming a small lava pool.

Torn by a feverish rage, Jake sought a target around him to vent his anger and this time Will didn’t draw the shortest stick. All his previous bad luck seemed to have been spent prematurely in anticipation of this fateful moment.

When Brice saw his cousin's eyes shimmering like stars landing on him with a killing intent so thick he could barely breathe, he reacted promptly.

Despite his soreness and exhaustion, he reactivated his ethereal presence and drifted like a shadow towards the previous hall.

And yet, Jake's glowing pupils remained locked on him, tracking him perfectly with the indifferent coldness of a lurking predator. When Brice accidentally crossed his cousin's gaze, the Apex Predator Glyph took effect explosively.

Brice found himself paralyzed on the spot; the Sideration effect had been triggered.

'No, no! Don't come any closer! It's me Brice, your cousin. George help me!' Brice, who boasted of never speaking without reason, suddenly became extremely talkative.

The George mentioned had already cowered at the end of the hall and the light emitted by his scales had strangely reorganised itself to produce almost perfect invisibility. Holding his breath and slowing down his heart, the latter had every intention of playing dead so as to weather this crisis.

'Jake, calm down. Stop coming closer! God damn it, if you take one more step, I'll make you pay for it, I swear on my life! Fuck you!'

Brice was ruthless to his enemies, but also to himself. When he realized that because of his fright he had fallen into the clutches of a Soul Glyph, he decisively stabbed his sword in his thigh and the pain jolted him out of his terror.

'Aargh, goddamn it, I'll make you pay for this.' Brice started running with a limp, but as he was about to walk through the door to the previous hall, a fiery breeze caressed his face and the world began to turn.

SMASH!

By the time Jake came to his senses, he had left the Red Soul Spell's field of influence and his body was covered in blood. By sniffing the warm blood covering his hands, he confirmed that it wasn't his own.

'Cough, cough. I liked you better... when you were little...' A pathetically feeble voice resounded a few meters below him.

Gazing down, Jake discovered the charred body of his cousin Brice at the bottom of a fiery crater several meters deep. A hole twenty centimeters in diameter filled with lava had replaced his stomach and the rest of his torso would soon melt away.

Surprisingly, his cousin was still alive, although not for long...

Upon witnessing what he had just done, Jake stepped back and controlled the lava and the ambient heat to reabsorb it back into himself, but it was already too late. A slight vertigo hit him without warning and he realized that his impressive musculature had shrunk substantially.

By consulting his Status, he discovered that he had lost almost 40 kilos during his short blackout. In addition, his bones were cracked in many places as if he had used more power than they could bear.

It didn't matter, this time he had only lost a little muscle, water and fat. But two or three similar accidents and his mummy corpse would surely rot here for eternity as well.

Regardless, Jake didn't think much of his deed. Although he had never intended to take revenge so directly on his cousin, it had happened. It could be considered as a fair retribution after all the mean things his cousin had done to him in the past. He could even be considered the bully now.

From his point of view, they were even.

'Wait.' George yelled again as he once again became visible at the other end of the hall.

‘I know,’ Jake grunted with a sullen expression.

No ultraviolet rays or anything to do with the sun if he wanted to survive here. He had finally realized that the Blue Soul Spell in the previous hall would never have been so powerful if his body hadn’t held in all that radiation.

The Zhorions were vulnerable to the sun. Whoever had set the traps, he had made sure that their nemesis would not be able to get off scot-free.

Not finding Will in the hall, but still seeing his name in the Player Rankings, Jake heaved a sigh of relief. At least he hadn’t killed his comrade by mistake. Cooking Sarah alive was enough for him.

Not being completely insensitive, Jake helped George stabilize Brice, who had already fainted. With his temporary 616 Aether Vitality points, it was child’s play. There was nothing he could do to save him, but with his cousin’s constitution he could surely survive a few more hours once all the wounds were cauterized and the healing process started.

He then entered the Red Soul Spell domain again, being careful not to attract the trap’s attention with too much ultraviolet light. Still, the Red Soul Spell he had to resist was several times more concentrated than the one that had affected Will.

Dulnaou ovu zalcl, Jfcu hmpit rmo hmQniuouiW lvpO mdd val arouzrfi zftafoamr. Id vu tat, ovu FiaroapQ frt Nfuypfo Qaruzfil ar val huiil jmpit film lofzo uQaooare. Io jfl bplo fl tfreuzmpl.

In the end, he managed to resist the Red Soul Spell by sheer willpower. His boosted stats were adequate to overcome the trap of this hall, just like the earlier one.

As he went through the door, the scenery changed abruptly and he came across another Red Soul Spell, but Will was nowhere to be seen. The

darkness was back, and except for the luminous arrows pointing to a half-open door, he couldn't see anything, not even the Aetheric signature of another Player.

Furthermore... This time he found no markings or resting areas outside of the trap's range. The new Red Soul Spell had taken over from the previous one without the slightest discontinuity, and this time there was nowhere to hide.

When Jake cautiously made a step forward, the spell's intensity grew faintly but distinctly, increasing significantly the strain on Jake's mind. At least it seemed that his cousin George had not lied to him.

As he almost reached the next door, he felt a lukewarm, viscous liquid drop on his head and then run down his skull. Jumping back by reflex, he was shocked when he discovered that he was not hearing any flowing sound.

The luminous arrows that had never ceased to shine then began to flicker occasionally when an unknown object or entity passed in front of him, obstructing Jake's vision.

After the phenomenon occurred several times, one of these crawling objects decided to pause over one of the light arrows and the outline of a long-clawed paw took shape in the darkness.

He was not alone in this room.

A gentle wind brushed against his face, softly ruffling his silver hair. When a foul stench of rotten meat assaulted his nostrils shortly after, he stopped wondering and faced the facts.