

The Oracle Paths

- Chapter 898: You Killed Me

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"Aahhhhh! Don't kill me!" She suddenly screamed as she crawled fearfully backwards until her back hit the wall.

Jake was so flabbergasted that he stood frozen in place. Watching as she continued to avoid his gaze, crouched on the floor shaking with fear, he watched her blankly for a moment and then broke the silence.

"Why would I want to kill you?" He asked with genuine concern.

It would be a lie to say that he had never felt the urge, but he was curious as to why a seemingly amnesiac Ruby was so convinced of his killing intent.

His question did not have the desired effect and the young woman yelled again in panic, convinced that he wanted her dead. Jake was already no saint before his recent mutation and his patience was even thinner now. After ignoring him for so long despite her belief that he wanted her dead, a real killing intent began to stir.

Ruby's eyes widened in shock, her mouth opening like a fish choking out of water.

"Since you want to die so badly instead of answering my question, so be it." Jake declared coldly with no hint of mercy.

His arm slowly reached out to the frightened young woman and his fingers curled into a fist. When his fist was about to close completely, Ruby shouted, " B-because... Because..."

Her face turned red with confusion as she realized she was unable to articulate an answer. Her gut was screaming at her that she should fear him and that he was her enemy, but ironically she was unable to come up with a reason. Yet every time she met his gaze, she was convinced that he had the power of life and death over her.

"Do you know who I am?" Jake then questioned her, giving up the idea of receiving an intelligible answer to his first question.

" ... "

Ruby couldn't answer that question either. The face was familiar and she was sure she had met him somewhere else before, but beyond that first inkling she was unable to say more.

Jake sighed and went on with his questioning, "In that case do you remember anyone or anything else?"

The young woman wrinkled her forehead in a desperate effort to remember something and soon the image of a late-twenties woman in uniform pushing a girl in a wheelchair around a military base appeared in her mind.

"My... Aunt?" She fumbled a half-hearted response. "I was... crippled?"

"What else? Do you have any more recent memories?"

Jake had devoured Digestor Ruby and knew most of the details of the amnesiac young woman's life as if he had personally lived it. It was very confusing, but it was still a thousand times better than having no memories at all.

He didn't ask all those questions for no reason. When Ruby's Digestor half had split from her original body under Psykow's spell, she had also stolen a lot of memories from her human half. Mostly recent memories.

He didn't realize it at the time, as the Digestor half's memories greatly predominated in intensity, but now that the real Ruby was in front of him a flood of memories experienced from a different angle assaulted his mind.

Jake could easily distinguish between these memories based on their clarity and perspective. When Ruby's Digestor half was conscious or in control, her feelings and perception of events were very grim and cold, filled with hate. It was impossible to mistake.

Memories belonging solely to the Digestor were rare in Ruby's early childhood, often lasting no more than a few seconds and with long periods of time elapsing before the next one. These memories became increasingly longer and more prevalent as the young woman grew, becoming explosively dominant shortly after she acquired her Oracle Device.

In contrast, the human Ruby's memories were much more nuanced. Although she suffered from ugliness and disability, loneliness, and the discrimination and teasing of children her age, her life was not all gloom. She was a cheerful, vibrant girl who strived to be constantly optimistic. Sadness and despair often overtook her and she would spend many nights weeping alone in her room out of sight, but these breakdowns never lasted more than a few hours. The next morning, she would smile again and face the next day with renewed fortitude.

Because Jake had access to all these memories, his hostility and resentment toward Ruby naturally waned. It was hard to hold a grudge against someone he understood and could feel the reasons and emotions behind her every action.

The truth was, the last few months of her life had been spent consumed by insecurity, fear and guilt. Like her Digestor half's earliest memories, everything her human half remembered from the past few months was rather hazy as if it were dreams or rather a succession of blurred nightmares.

At times, there were very rare bursts of lucidity where the memories appeared extremely clearly in her head, and Jake had realized to his utter dismay what they all had in common: He was present. In all of them.

He remembered those moments clearly too. Because he also had access to the memories of Ruby's Digestor half, he even had a second perspective to figure out the reason. Or rather, the two reasons.

The first was that since their first encounter, Ruby considered him her Soulmate as well. Their meeting in the VR Center was no accident. She too had been given an Oracle Mission. What she felt for him was obviously not love. They had only seen each other a few times, so they didn't really know each other.

On the other hand, he could feel how positively she viewed him and how keenly she wanted to see him smile as if he were someone important to her as soon as they met. This was uncanny since he could confirm by reading her past memories that they had never met before.

The second reason was that Ruby's Digestor half had come to fear him long before her demise. Every time Jake appeared before her, the Digestor would lose her footing and Ruby's human half would grow more ferocious, forcing her to exert more effort to stay in control. At some point, her Digestor half had identified Jake as her nemesis, a being she had to avoid or kill at the first chance.

Both of these projects had gone horribly wrong.

So why was Jake throwing all these questions at Ruby if he knew she didn't have those memories? Because if she didn't remember him, how could she let him into that building and deny access to her teammates who grew up with her?

There was something weird and inconsistent about it, and his instinct was telling him that it was very important. Upon reading all of these new memories, he no longer saw the term "soulmate" chosen by the Oracle as a childish attempt to set him up with a girl, but rather as something to be taken literally.

Why? Because he couldn't feel any discord between his memories and Ruby's. It was as if those memories were his own. It was as if those memories really belonged to him,

and that caring impulse she'd felt when she first met him he'd also experienced in a milder way.

'Did our parents know each other?' he wondered as he scrunched up his face.

Once Pandora's box was opened, anything was possible. He tried to remember his parents and everything he knew about them, but unfortunately, it was too old. All he could remember was that his parents were on a business trip to Paris when the Digestors visited Earth on May 14, 2084.

Jake then studied Ruby's facial features carefully, but they didn't look the same at all. 'I doubt we're related by blood.'

He could at least rule out his father's adultery under the guise of a business trip. Ruby Hale... He had never asked what his mother's maiden name was, and he decided to investigate when he returned from the Ordeal to find out for sure. Whenever he felt a doubt arise, he would turn paranoid until the mystery was solved.

Then he remembered that Ruby looked exactly like her aunt when she was young. Craig and Ryo had told them that they didn't look at all alike when she was younger. Which was only natural, since they were not really related.

Jake's heart suddenly skipped a beat. He had a bad feeling about this. Didn't he also look like his uncle when he was younger? His Uncle Kalen had always said he looked more like him than his father and that was probably his reward for raising him so well.

Jake immediately banished that horrible thought from his mind. "It means nothing."

He was even blown away by his own imagination. An overly high IQ and tree-like thinking fueled by a pinch of paranoia could produce the most convoluted scenarios.

At that moment, Jake suddenly noticed that Ruby had been staring at him suspiciously for a while, her panic much less than earlier. He was immediately struck by a vague certainty.

"You remember me." He said.

"I remember you." She confirmed, staring at him with a complicated expression. "You killed me."

Chapter 899: She's Still My Slave

Jake's pupils narrowed slightly. "Your memories are coming back? Since when?"

The memory of her death belonged only to her Digestor half. She shouldn't have access to it.

Ruby grimaced with confusion, then admitted, "I don't know. The memories are just coming back to me bit by bit since you started questioning me. It's just flashes and fragments of memory so far."

Jake quirked an eyebrow. Back on Earth, he had heard stories of patients suffering from amnesia due to head trauma or brain tumor removal who regained their memories when the damaged or removed portion of the brain recovered. This challenged the idea that memory was simply stored in a particular area of the brain, since when that area was destroyed it could in some cases be restored.

Perhaps the soul worked the same way and that was probably how an Oracle Heal lvl 5 had enabled them to remember what they had done when Psykow's spell had driven them to insanity. It was still very disconcerting, though.

'Xi, how are our memories restored when the Oracle Heal heals a damaged mind?' He asked mentally.

'Several possibilities.' Xi replied readily. 'The Soul is like an onion with multiple layers. As with the DNA in the nucleus of your cells, most of your information is stored in it, but your memories are usually not, or only in a highly encoded and imperfect form. The worlds where the concept of reincarnation exists with the notion of heaven and hell use a soul cleansing process to normally purge the deceased of all their past memories. They are not supposed to remember their past lives and they usually develop significantly different personalities upon rebirth. However, certain traits of their personality tend to be retained and the feeling of "déjà vu" often results from residual memories that could not be erased or that reappeared much later. This supports the thesis that our memories are much harder to destroy than we think. It is said in computer science that a skilled expert can retrieve data from a computer even after it has been reformatted ten times. Even after a hard drive has burned out, some information can still be recovered. This means that the Oracle can theoretically use a similar process to restore lost memories as long as the soul has only been superficially damaged.'

'Other species, like the Digestors for example, are even more enigmatic. Their souls can be completely annihilated to 99.9%, but if they are allowed to regenerate all their memories come back at once. Each piece of their soul represents both a part and a whole. This is the case of Vexa and his clones and I think it is also your case, or rather that of the Eltarrians whose mind is said to be outstanding. Otherwise, you would not have recovered so easily mentally from all the spiritual wounds you have suffered. That's what I thought before, but now it seems that your situation is a bit more complex.'

'The third and final method is to use your Oracle Device logbook. Everything you live and do is recorded in the Oracle System database. Your soul is also scanned regularly.'

If other methods fail, the Oracle Heal can use this data to bring your soul back to the most recent version available. Since our souls are also closely interconnected, I should also be able to do this in theory if you allow me to. Still, from my point of view, it means you were technically dead, even though for the one reborn with those new memories, there will be no sense of discontinuity.'

Jake mulled over this barrage of information with a pondering face and then asked, "What about Ruby then? She's not a Digestor anymore as far as I know. Could she have retained some abilities after being a Digestor Trojan for so long?"

'I don't know... I don't have access to the Oracle System archives anymore either...' Xi sighed in a destitute voice. He could feel how useless she felt at this moment. 'I feel it's still there, but I can't connect to it.'

Jake didn't insist and turned his attention back to Ruby. "Let's not force things. Your memories will come back to you in time. What about your Oracle AI?"

The young woman blinked dumbly and he realized she didn't know what it was. Once he patiently explained it to her, she began to have a vague sense of familiarity and tried to mentally contact her AI.

"Nothing. Are you sure I have one of those bracelets too?" She queried, staring at him with some doubt as if he wasn't in his right mind.

It suddenly tilted. Jake hadn't bothered to check if she was still wearing her bracelet. What he was sure of was that most of the liquid alloy had been on her Digestor half when he had eaten her. If she still had a bracelet, there was no guarantee that it could still function.

He waved his hand casually and a blob of liquid alloy shot into her body, making her recoil in surprise.

"Wh-what was that?" She stammered breathlessly.

"Try again." Jake ordered without explanation.

Ruby raised a suspicious eyebrow, then closed her eyes. A second later, she opened them again and exclaimed, "He answered me!"

"He?" Jake pursed his lips. "What did he say? Ask him if he stored a copy of your memories?"

Ruby obeyed meekly, then answered with a rueful look a minute later, "He couldn't. He said that when I was a Digestor Trojan, my corrupted aura jammed his connection to the Oracle System. The automatic Oracle Scan also worked only superficially on me. However, it claims that my memories will return."

"Oh? Your Oracle AI is so sure of that?" Jake was now puzzled. Even Xi, another Oracle AI who had only recently lost her connection to the Oracle System was not so confident.

It didn't matter. All that mattered was that she was safe and well for the time being. His resentment towards Ruby no longer made any sense. Simply because he understood her and in her current state she was no longer a threat.

The fact that she remembered events experienced by her Digestor half after their split raised new concerns, however. What would happen if she regained her memory completely? Would she become the same Digestor Trojan she was before?

Jake decided not to worry about that for now. He gestured to the wall behind him and suggested,

"Let's go out. Your friends are waiting for you outside. Maybe it will help you get your memory back faster."

"Okay..." She whispered in a small, browbeaten voice.

Jake started to walk towards the exit, when he felt a small, soft, cold hand grab his own.

"What are you doing?" He questioned.

Ruby stuttered with a shifty look in her eyes, "I-I'm a little scared to go out."

Jake was dumbstruck. Was this really the same moody, psychopathic Ruby who had tried to kill him so many times? For a brief moment, the image of the unremarkable girl she had been when they first met overlapped with the scared beauty tightly holding his hand.

"And you're not afraid of me anymore?" He couldn't help but ask. "Just then, you were terrified because you were convinced that I wanted to kill you."

The young woman pouted adorably and grumbled, "You've already killed me. You're not going to kill me again, are you?"

Jake caught the teasing glint in her eyes and recognized the Ruby of the past a little more. At least for now, her humanity seemed to be back.

"As long as you don't give me a reason..." He growled as he strode toward the wall, dragging the young woman along with him.

A second later, they emerged on the other side. Craig and Ryo squealed in delight as they recognized Ruby and pounced on her. The poor amnesiac woman was so terrified

that she shrieked and if Jake wasn't still holding her hand she would have crawled back through the wall to hide in her building.

"Hey Ruby, it's just us!" Ryo chided her while poking her chest a few times with an accusatory scowl. "It's really not cool to pretend not to recognize us like that."

As usual, the Japanese Player was shirtless, and with his bald head, his scoundrel attitude and his huge claymore he could only intimidate a flustered young woman.

"I-I don't know you!"

"Okay, Ryo leave her alone." Craig patted his friend on the shoulder. "Thanks, Jake."

"Thanks." Wang Xiaoming, the highest ranking member of their team bowed as well. "We'll take care of her from now on."

The attitude was respectful, but Jake could sense that the soldier wasn't giving him a choice.

"Fine, I'll let you take care of her." He agreed as he let go of Ruby's hand. Seeing her panic, he said, "These are your friends. You grew up with them. They will take care of you and unlike me they never tried to kill you."

He then turned to Wang Xiaoming and the other New Earth survivors and said telepathically in a threatening voice, "Technically, Ruby is still my Oracle Slave. If she is unwell I will feel it. Also, if one day you can't take care of her, let me know. I'll see what I can do."

Chapter 900: Stuck In Front Of The Gate

The New Earth Players stiffened as they received his thinly veiled threat. Not to mention that it rubbed salt in the wound by reminding them that one of their comrades was the slave of a dangerous human with no obligations to the Earth Union.

"We'll try to keep that in mind." Wang Xiaoming replied in a rude voice, his face frosting over.

Melissa had already rescued Ruby from the boisterous Ryo and she was now in good hands.

"Be good." Jake gave her one last look, then nodded to Craig and Ryo and headed with his companions toward the Divine Academy.

The energy dome that once protected it had long since been shut down by the school's principal. There was no impenetrable force field to stop their march, and they only had to imitate the path taken by the Demiurge Players to find the entrance. Anyway, it wasn't as if they could go wrong.

Blending palace and fairy tale castle with high pointed towers, the primary difference was that the Celestial City was not really a city but a spaceship, or rather some sort of orbital station. The Divine Academy was part of this huge structure and its walls and roofs were therefore obviously not made of stones, bricks and tiles. In fact, despite its grand architecture, its walls were streamlined and smooth, jet black and giving the feeling that the building had been cast rather than built.

The front door was two large silver-blue steel doors as tall as a four-story building and as such was quite impossible to miss unless one was totally blind. The real challenge of this door was not to find it, but to open it. At a glance, Jake could tell that pushing the door open with his own hands would require considerable strength.

Nothing insurmountable for Ordeal winners like them, but by that criterion alone a good number of participants basically had no chance of ever being able to enter the academy premises freely.

As they arrived at the door, Jake recognized several familiar faces. Tim? Skorgeld, Trea and Fo, the other three Beskyrians, were also present. He hadn't heard from them, so he didn't know for sure if they were alive, but he had apparently been worrying for nothing. Their luck was really a wonderful asset.

'Wait. Aren't I supposed to be very lucky too? Why did I brush with death so many times then?' Jake suddenly felt a deep sense of injustice.

He could see at a glance that Tim and his three companions had not suffered as much as he and the other Myrtharian Nerds. At least their armor was still in one piece.

'Oh, don't complain.' Xi clicked her tongue figuratively. 'You're definitely the luckiest of them all. Your survival after all that has happened is a miracle. But unlike you, they can use their luck actively as a resource, while yours is totally passive. That's why its effects in your case are much more unreliable.'

Xi's words were immediately confirmed by Tim when he directly addressed the question to them.

"When the situation started to get out of hand, we fused our luck together and looked for a way out." The teen explained with some shame. The truth was that the four Beskyrians had cowardly abandoned them instead of continuing the fight together even if it was out of pure self-preservation.

"By pooling our luck together we managed to create a statistically improbable local fragility in the energy shield encompassing the Divine Academy and stormed through it with our Oracle Shield." Skorgeld, Ulfar's son quietly enlightened. "We thought we could repeat the feat to help you on the other side, but after that we were struck by the misfortune backlash. Breathing a little too hard might accidentally break a rib so we could only resolve to pray that you succeed."

"How convenient." Lord Phenix sneered.

"Hey! We saved another person too. A snooty, despicable Vampire from Pureblood." Trea defended herself vehemently.

Wyatt and Carmin's faces suddenly brightened. "Who?"

"Seren."

"I should have known." Carmin snorted without hiding any of her utter disdain for the pureblood extremist. "While we were dying one after another, she was figuring out how to save her life. I must say she has good instincts."

"That's enough Carmin." Wyatt raised his voice a little. "I don't blame her. If everyone had followed her example we wouldn't be the only three survivors of our faction."

The pretty brunette disagreed, but she didn't dare contradict him. It was the truth. They had been too reckless during the last stage of the Ordeal and had greatly overestimated their abilities.

"Where is this Seren then?" Will chimed in on the conversation.

Fo, the Beskyrian woman of noble lineage who specialized in talismans, huffed in anger and spat, "She ditched us here to explore the Divine Academy alone. Not a single thank you. If it weren't for the fact that our two factions are allies I would have taught her a lesson."

Tim, Skorgeld, and Trea nodded in agreement.

Jake stared at them alternately and then asked the awkward question, "What are you waiting for at the entrance?"

Tim and his three companions exchanged awkward glances, then Trea confessed awkwardly, "It so happens that the backlash from spending all our luck isn't over. The curse of bad luck isn't as dangerous as it used to be, but it's still enough to endanger us if we try to open a door like that without caution."

Jake understood right away as he tried to push the leaves of the huge steel door. Even with 80% of his strength it had not budged one iota. It was important to know that his

current strength was beyond belief. Without his Oracle Status he was not even able to estimate the extent of it.

He realized very quickly that this was not a door to be pushed open, but one to be pushed aside. The thing was, there was no good grip for his hands. It was more like the kind of sliding door structure found in automatic doors in supermarkets.

Still, he had seen the door open without a hitch for the Demiurges Players.

"How did Seren get in?" Jake asked Tim. He was willing to believe that the Vampire had a few tricks up her sleeve, but he was 100% positive that she wasn't stronger than him.

"By touching the door with her bracelet." The teenager shrank his shoulders.

Jake's mouth dropped open. Was it that simple? A mere recognition system through the Oracle System? That explained why he couldn't open it now.

Aisling wasn't familiar with the four Beskyrians' powers and couldn't help but express doubts, "If the door opens automatically and you just have to authenticate yourself what's the problem?"

This time Will spared the boy further embarrassment and explained instead, "If even Jake can't open that door by brute force, that means it's heavy enough to kill most of us. If the door opens automatically, it means it relies on technology. That's what a power as elusive as luck or bad luck can tamper with most easily. If there is a remote chance that the door may malfunction, their bad luck will trigger it. Imagine what would happen if the two sliding doors suddenly closed on them. They would be crushed to death on the spot..."

Tim and the other three Beskyrians flinched. This was exactly what they feared, even though it was extremely unlikely.

"Well, I'll have to open the door manually anyway." Jake suddenly felt like an outcast among his peers. "You go in first, I'll stay with them. If I can get it open I'll hold the door for them."

Lucia and Enya both stared at him intently for a short instant but did not argue. They trusted him. But not Ashun. If the two women hadn't pushed her inside, she would have insisted on staying back to watch how he planned to open the door.

"See you later then." They smiled and pressed their bracelets against the door.

The two giant panels slid open at supersonic speed, whipping up a deafening gust of wind. The two women turned pale and finally realized why the four cursed Beskyrians refused to take the risk, no matter what.

After the two women passed through, the two doors closed even more viciously, colliding with so much force that Jake doubted he could escape unscathed if he were to stand in the middle. This door was as much a means of defense as it was of attack. Opening it was just the beginning of trouble.

Under the somewhat contrived smiles of Jake and the four hapless ones, the other Myrtharian Nerds, Pureblood and Ryne stepped into the academy one after the other. When the doors clanked one last time after the cocky Crunch shuffled proudly past his fuming master, Jake groused grimly,

"My turn."

In front of the others he hadn't dared to use all his strength, but since this door was so hard to open and he wanted to know his limits, he found this was the perfect opportunity to put them to the test.