

The Oracle Paths

Volume 4: The Purgatory

Chapter 476 - Success?

Somewhere in an empty cave was a tank. The walls were riddled with multiple holes that together formed a complex network of tunnels. Although beastly and frenzied squeals could be heard in the distance, the cave and its galleries were resolutely empty, as if they had been forgotten in the midst of all this cacophony.

In the center, there was a basin filled with a thick blueberry colored liquid bubbling gently. In this incredibly deep pool, swam a dozen huge prehistoric snakes with grayish skin and no scales.

One of them, at the bottom of the basin, had a stomach more swollen than the others and his eyelids were slightly drooping, attesting that he was about to have a digestive nap.

Yet, just as he was dozing off, his eyes bulged out, filled with indescribable confusion and distress. The bulge in his belly began to swell and pulsate, the shape of human fists and feet appearing regularly on its surface with a dull thud at each impact.

A bright item flashed repeatedly in this area, causing dark blood to gush out as if the valves of a faucet had just been switched on.

The boa's body twitched in pain, then began to thrash about wildly, repeatedly slamming into the walls of the pool. A few minutes later, the snake stopped struggling and its inert body turned over, belly up to the sky.

A punch, more powerful than the others, then pierced through the reptile's stomach and the person inside took advantage of the breach to bring out his other hand wielding a knife. With it, the person inside began to disembowel the beast holding him prisoner and a moment later, Peter's unrecognizable body crawled out of there.

His neglected, drug-addicted physique had swollen, muscles upon muscles having grown unevenly over his body. His skin had taken on an unhealthy blueberry color comparable to that of the basin and was covered in fine scales. His pupils were slit, his irises were yellowish, his claws were dark and hooked, and a long pitted tail wagged limply behind him, his features vaguely resembling the snake he had just killed.

As soon as he appeared in the pool, the other snakes, already excited by the scent of their fellow snake's blood, came charging at him all at once, intent on making him their next meal.

'Sigh... I just wanted to drug myself in peace...' Peter's aggrieved voice echoed in the pool notwithstanding the fact that he was still immersed in a liquid. 'Now that I'm in this state... these poisons no longer have any effect. But people have it all wrong about me. It's not drugs I crave, but the thrill that comes with them. If I can't get it peacefully anymore... there are other ways.'

At that moment, a predatory aura welled forth from the bottom of the basin and the blueberry liquid began to boil harder, as if someone had increased the strength of the fire heating the bottom of a pot. The titanoboas that were about to reach him snapped their mouths shut in haste and hissed in terror as they scrambled back.

'Too bad you're not one of those parasites...' Peter taunted with a flicker of compassion in his gaze. 'If you were, your fearlessness would have saved you unnecessary suffering...'

After that, hissing gasps of agony echoed through the cave for a long moment, the surface of the overflowing tank spilling over regularly as if its contents were being shaken back and forth by the rampant abomination within.

Once the three Controllers were gone, the battle quickly ended. The first few giant Hunters to be wiped out brought an end to the enemy's relative numerical superiority, as the horde of normal monsters had so far been kept in check by Carmin with minimal trouble.

Her crystallized blood chains and other bloody weapons were a blazing red and appeared to carry a spark of intelligence of their own. Ripping through the enemy ranks like streams of shooting stars, no creature managed to outlast them for more than a few seconds. Even the broad 4-6m-high Hunters failed to avoid the lethal slashes directed at their vulnerable parts or orifices.

Without a Controller to fuel Ralnor's murderous rampage, Mihangyl managed to tranquilize him for a third time with his Nature Magic, but from the sweat on his forehead, it was no picnic. It was doubtful whether he would be able to repeat the feat a fourth time.

Once the twelve giant Hunters were eliminated, Jake and the others helped Carmin clear out the other monsters that were still pouring in. The group soldiered on for a couple of minutes without the enemy horde showing any sign of abating, before Jake and Mihangyl switched gears.

Invoking his earth manipulation, Jake grabbed the void in front of him and the rock lining the tunnel closest to him crumpled as if he had just yanked back a sheet. The rock folded in on itself, and the gallery soon became sealed off.

After that, he tried other methods, more or less demanding in terms of attention and energy, until he finally found the ideal solution: Trapping each tunnel with multiple rock spears. The Hunters still inside were skewered three or four at a time and the tunnels quickly became a mess.

With the galleries sealed with cement made from the corpses and guts of parasites, and a foundation made from rock spikes, the Hunters waiting on the other side found themselves inevitably stalled.

At the same time, the Wood Archmage did the same by growing multiple solid, woody shrubs, which obstructed and impaled all the monsters inside. The end result was very similar to Jake's gory method.

Inspired, Ralnor and the two sisters bombarded the tunnels with their powers to force the entrance to collapse. This method was more taxing physically and they soon began to pant. Still, after a few moments, about ten tunnels had been sealed off in this manner.

Kyle had to stay on the sidelines this time, as his sword and physical strength alone were not enough. If the horde of Hunters weren't there, he might have been able to collapse one of those tunnels with some effort, but in the middle of a fight it wasn't reasonable.

Hephais had the same issue. His Shadow Magic was far more versatile than he pretended, but it was primarily characterized by its impermanence and volatility. To a lesser extent, it was opposed to the Light Element of the two sisters, being able to pollute, corrupt, and corrode.

Its main attributes were speed, stealth and untouchability and only as a last resort attack. If the assassin could mold the Shadows to his liking to form all sorts of tangible weapons, a Shadow Spear was not as efficient and direct as a plain fireball.

As for Ostrexora... She was too busy concentrating not to choke on her own saliva. She was just beginning to comprehend what the spell Tim had cast on her was all about.

Basically, the world itself and her own body seemed to be ganging up on her and exploiting every flaw to their advantage. She had already worked out the limits of this ability and mercifully it wasn't invincible.

If it was, her soul would simply have dissipated of its own accord without her being able to resist. Perhaps it was possible with even more extreme misfortune, but she did not wish to even think about it.

'Tim...' The Ghost lady gnashed her teeth in pure hatred as she visualized the teenager's smug smirk before his death.

Now, in addition to men, she also hated a little boy. However, once the surprise wore off, she thought back to her behavior and realized that it was all her fault. By relishing in the death and hardship of her comrades instead of helping them, she had eventually gotten what she deserved.

'Fine, I'll do my part from now on.' She decided grimly.

If she continued to act like this, she wouldn't last long in her condition. From what should have been an easy and relaxing ending to her Ordeal, she would now have to keep her nose to the grindstone to survive. The murderous looks that Jake, Kyle and the two sisters were giving her reminded her how much they scorned her.

When almost all the tunnels had been sealed off, Ostrexora felt confident enough to make her move and with a screeching wail, she caused a cave-in in the remaining tunnel. However, it was not rock, but dust.

Upon contact with the sound, the walls had cracked so finely before giving way that it looked like soft sand. This was the first time the Ghost woman had used a physical attack.

Her spectacular, albeit belated, participation earned her no praise, but the hostility Kyle was aiming at her suddenly subsided. He would have plenty of time to hate her when he was strong enough.

With the last gallery blocked off, the cackling of the horde was essentially muffled and a welcome silence descended on the cave. With a swift wave of his hand, Jake cleared the floor of the corpses and blood that had soaked the Fluid Artifact in the center and serenely walked toward it.

Grabbing his own replica, he pressed it against the original version before stopping at the very last step. Scanning the cave with his mental power, he relaxed only after detecting nothing suspicious.

Relieved, Jake covered the final inch between his replica and the Purgatory Fluid Artefact and the two copies finally made contact. When they did, he felt a powerful magnet pull the replica out of his hand.

The two objects instantly merged in a blinding flash of light, and the cave around them began to flicker in a strobe-like fashion, as if someone were turning the light on and off repeatedly. Sometimes they could see the cave, while the cold, stark walls and pipes of the space station filled their vision the rest of the time.

A few seconds later, the cave disappeared completely and they appeared in an empty room of the station. The Purgatory had at last been deactivated. Sigmar's plan had succeeded.

Yet, it was precisely at this juncture that Jake's expression abruptly underwent a change.

