

The Oracle Paths

Volume 1: The Oracle

Oracle Chapter 11 - VR Center

Beep...Beep...

This morning, Jake woke up fast. He just smashed the turn-off button with a quick move. He was excited about his first day at work in the company of Xi. His job was rather boring, but he could talk to Xi with his mind, or pass his time formulating some wishes. It would also allow him to figure out the limits of the Oracle bracelet.

Yawning, he went to the restroom, you know, to lose some excess weight. When he sat down on the icy throne, his buttocks met a silky-like black fur instead of the supposed to be toilet seat.

‘HISSSS!!’

He jumped so high that he almost knocked himself into the ceiling.

‘Fuck!’ He cursed, the few remnants of his sleepiness totally gone. ‘What is this dumb cat doing? Crunch don’t drink the water inside the toilet!’

[I don’t think Crunch drank any water... According to my data, he was excreting.]

‘Thanks Sherlock, I can smell that!’ He retorted aggressively. ‘But my question is, why the hell is he doing that? Have I not bought for him a litter yesterday especially because cats don’t do this?’

[You are right.] Xi confirmed with the same apathetic tone. [But what is the most convenient for you? Having to clean up his litter every day with the stench that comes with it or having a cat able to use the toilet?]

The sharp response Jake had in mind remained stuck between his teeth. Indeed, what was the most practical for him? With a procrastinator like him, the answer was obvious. If this cat could use the restroom, why should he stop him? Hell, other people with cats would even be jealous of him!

Then, what did it mean? Whether it was the 500 dollars or this cat using the toilet in order to make his life easier, it all followed a Path. From what he deduced, this cat probably had a fear of being rejected and wanted to be loved. As a result, one of his Paths should have been adjusting his behavior so that he would seem so much more pleasant for his new owner, him.

These Oracle devices were incredible. Professional tamers must be so depressed right now, seeing some alien pieces of junk doing a better job at training animals than themselves. Well, tamers too had an Oracle bracelet right now, so it was not all bad.

Jake patiently waited outside that Crunch finished his little private matter. Speechless, he heard after a while the loud toilet flush, followed soon after by a leisurely black cat strutting out of the restroom with a čocky gait. Hail the Oracle!

Twenty minutes later he was showered and dressed. He was wearing a black tee-shirt this time, brown slacks and the same white pair of sneakers. He decided to dissimulate his bracelet. This way no one could initiate contact with his Oracle device against his will. It was not perfect, but it was reassuring for him.

The news channel confirmed what he already expected. The lottery's jackpot of the day before had been shared between more than one hundred thousand people. From a five million dollar reward, it had become less than fifty dollars. Better than nothing, but insignificant compared to the original sum.

Casinos, betting establishments were almost all closed-down by now. The stock market had begun to stabilize. Policemen made a big catch, arresting tens of serial killers, rapists, and burglars that had spread terror for years but whose shadows couldn't even be seen.

Simultaneously, many crimes happened. One famous woman singer had been charged by a giant crowd of fanatic fans while she was having a secret date with her boyfriend. They were disguised and shouldn't have been recognized, but all these fans were waiting for them at their supposed to be secret meeting place.

In the end, she had been jostled so much by the hard-fan army that they were now treated by a psychologist specialized in post-traumatic stress disorder. The woman singer even canceled her upcoming tour, henceforth shivering just by hearing the words 'crowds' and 'fans'.

Comparatively, one random university student succeeded to get a date with an idol from her favorite boy band. Another criminal on the run that had already been locked by his pursuers had miraculously vanished after a high-speed car chase that seemed right out of a video-game.

Some animals escaped from zoos or circus or had unusual behavior like Crunch. It must also be mentioned that a wave of suicides had also stroke most cities of Earth. New sects were also rising up from nowhere, multiplying like čóčkroaches.

Well, nothing to worry about. He was still as asocial as ever, hating his work, but at least he had his Oracle bracelet to face the coming trials.

This time, Jake let the black cat at home. Cautious, he even took his spare key with him. He was afraid of Crunch suddenly desiring to breathe some fresh air, and following a Path that would show him how to open a locked door. Unlikely, sure, but hey, better safe than sorry.

Once outside his building, he waved his hand to the first cab he saw. Fortunately for him, this one was empty. The taxi driver was a moribund middle-aged man with oily grey hair and mustache. The man was not talkative, possibly lacking sleep. It was quite reasonable with all the unforeseen developments from yesterday.

Streets were once again lively, but still not as crowded as before. Some people dealt with alien gifts more easily than others. During the ride, he scrutinized

bystanders out the window, trying to figure out which ones were moving along their Shadow Guide.

It was harder than expected. Some people effectively had a vacant look but they could also be simply lost in their thoughts. There were also those that stopped abruptly in the middle of a movement. These ones were obvious to distinguish. All the others in between were either not following a Path or far subtler than his observation skills could manage.

Twenty minutes later, Jake got out of the vehicle after having paid his bill. Taxis were affordable for most people in the 22nd century as they ran on electricity and were mostly autonomous. It should be embarrassing to charge excessively taxi customers when the cars were on automatic pilot.

In front of him, was a gigantic shopping center. Once inside on the second floor, a logo with VRGF written on it could be seen on the left side of the elevator. The exterior wall was painted black, though highlighted by some red lights akin to lasers crawling over the wall. A high-tech ceiling projector was playing a game cinematic fully reconstituted with holograms.

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To the right, the official VR store. It sold anything related to virtual reality technology, from VR helmet, VR suits, video-games and multidirectional treadmills to memberships allowing to use freely the VR arcade-rooms. Naturally, nothing of these were cheap.

To the left the access to the arcade rooms. There were thirty of them. Twenty of them were standards room accredited for official competitions. They were five meters long by five meters wide rooms with giant treadmills, hanging equipment and a set of cameras.

The other rooms were much more spacious and could be used for working out in VR environments or be booked by organized group events. The biggest one was never used and was, in fact, the staff room where they could relax around a cup of coffee, have lunch together or play VR video-games themselves.

The VR engineer job Jake landed a few months ago had not much to do with actual engineering. He was just loafing around at the VR store reception, once in a while greeting a new customer that needed a piece of advice about the new costly toy he was deemed to purchase.

He also had to look after the VR materials and tools from the arcade rooms or help the newbies to familiarize themselves with VR equipment. The cushy job of his dreams, but boring as fućk.

Just as he was about to make himself some tea, he heard some noise coming from within the staff locker room. A few minutes later, a puny man walked out of the changing room.

This guy was the spitting image of Harry Potter, but with red curly hair. A draft version, though. He was small, about five feet five, lacked sun as many workers in VR centers. He even had a scar in the middle of his forehead, but instead of a bolt of lightning, it looked like a constellation birthed from the remnant craters of a very virulent acne. Disgusting.

Did we mention Harry Potter's franchise was still going strong in the 22nd century? Last week the movie 'Grandpa Potter and the Magic retirement home' had been released. Already the most bankable movie of the year. Never let a good making-money license going to waste. Oh, shit, he felt some vomit in his mouth. He forced himself to swallow it down.

In short, his colleague was the typical nerd, sedentary, few friends, but with a very strong drive to be happy. One of the few Jake could qualify as a friend. He had a weird foreign accent from eastern Europe and was two years older than him.

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