

The Oracle Paths

Volume 1: The Oracle

Chapter 12 – First mission

‘Hey Jake!’ Harry greeted with a relieved expression. ‘I thought you would not come. Yesterday, it was only me and Camille. Camille because she’s the manager and I because I need the money. It was all for nothing in the end. We haven’t seen any customers.’

He looked like he was about to cry, so Jake abstained from ignoring him like every other morning. Yes, they were friends. Harry enjoyed the sound of his voice and Jake wasn’t bothered enough to interrupt him. A win-win situation.

‘Hi, Harry. You mean you were alone shitting yourself, right?’ Jake chuckled. Despite not talking much, he understood his coworker very well.

A real chatterbox, but with a deep inferiority complex. Harry was neither brave nor the sharpest knife of the drawer. He had once surprised him shrieking like a panic-stricken maiden more than once because of a simple wasp landing on his shoulder. There was also the spider accident where Paul Baker, the hunk of this VR center, had pranked him with a false tarantula.

Or maybe he was just scared of insects.

‘Don’t mention it!’ He yelled, patting his traumatized heart. ‘It was the worst day ever! An alien space ship, a fucking drone pursuing me nonstop as if I owed it something. And when this Oracle bracelet activated, the fucking A.I they gave me was a damn smutty old man. I immediately tried to change my setting, but the AI told me he was the perfect choice according to his data. The heck?!’

Jake was with great difficulty refraining himself from bursting into laughter. He could only thank his good luck for being blessed with someone like Xi. He still didn't know what appearance she would have, but at least it wouldn't be some crappy old man.

[Satisfied now? I can still send a request to the Overseer to ask for a replacement, if you wish so.] Xi intervened politely.

'Erk, I'm good...' He quickly refused her offer. He had no aspiration to form a cursed band with Harry.

'Uuh? Who are you talking to? Your Oracle AI?' Harry asked with enthusiasm.

'How is its voice? Man, woman? Darth Vader?'

'A woman. Is it even possible to choose a tampered voice like this?'

'You can. My AI had fun with his voice parameters for hours before settling down for a nauseating fawning voice.' Harry told him with a jaded face. His AI appeared to be a defective product compared to Xi.

[...]

'Yeah, I'm talking about you, gramps! What kind of shitty luck do I need to have to get an old codger like you?!' Harry yelled suddenly with unfocused eyes.

'Good, I thought he was insulting me for no reason...'

His Oracle AI was clearly messing up with him. Though, he believed Xi when she said the AIs were not chosen randomly. This nerdy guy certainly needed an old bastard to teach him how to grow a pair.

All of a sudden, they heard stomping noises closing in on them. They could recognize these stiletto heels from fifty meters away. They belonged to Camille Ells, their superior and manager of this VRGR center.

When she walked into the staff room, her smile took their breath away.

‘Hello, boys! Oh, Jake came too! Let’s hope for Thiru and Paul to be present as well. Otherwise, we’re taking the risk to be understaffed today with the qualifying rounds.’

‘Wha, what? Why am I only learning this this morning?’ Jake flared up with an indignant look that was crying how betrayed he felt.

‘Maybe, because you never gave a shit to anything happening in this center Jake.’ She retorted with a smile that was not really one.

Well, she was not wrong. Jake preferred keeping his silence on this one. It was hard to stay angry with Camille anyway. Regardless of his efforts, he was unable to stare at her in the eyes for long. Introvert and uncomfortable with excessively beautiful girls as always.

And beautiful she was. Camille Ells was a gorgeous blonde a few years older than them, but under thirty. She was six feet tall with her high heels. She also had a curvy body, kept in shape thanks to long hours of cardio training. Completing this portrait, her skin was suntanned all year round, revealing how superficial she was.

With her professional suit and black-rimmed glasses, she was the typical alpha woman, perfectly cut out to order around a bunch of nerds. Except for Jake that had almost irrepressible procrastinator instincts, all the other male employees were at her beck and call.

Jake landed the job only a few months ago. Therefore, he knew nothing about what these qualifying rounds entailed. But, somehow he could tell it wouldn’t be a cakewalk. He still was hopeful, though. Many people were still affected by all this alien thingy, so with a bit of luck, most of the competitors wouldn’t come.

Their VR center didn’t contain enough rooms to host the main competition anyway. Qualifying rounds happened in every VR arcade-rooms around the world. They were used to sort the wheat from the chaff. VRGF competitions were the new

Olympic games and it was basically possible to compete in anything: Athletics, martial arts, tennis, fencing and so on.

Naturally, FPS, RPG, and strategic games were still the most popular. Some of these famous VR games were even used for teaching purposes. Firefighters, militaries, pilots, special forces. Many of them were former VR professional players having won prestigious competitions or tournaments. Of course, it was under the premise that you didn't cheat.

In the end, Thiru and Paul didn't come to work. For Harry and Jake it was a piece of good and bad news at the same time. Their absence proved that even easy works like theirs were already too much to deal with for average people. Logically, serious competitors should have far higher dropout rates compared to them as they would refuse to compete with their actual mindset.

Id urmpev hmqnuoaomzl flcut dmz zunmzoare ovu ypfidware zmprtl, ovuw jmpit vfsu fo iuflo fr uflw juuc. Tvu gft rujl jfl ovfo ad ovuw juzu jzmre frt ovu hmqnuoaomr jfl qfarofarut, ovuw jmpit gu qallare ojm vuinare vftrl.

Camille has her own office to work so they rarely talked to her during the day except when they were taking short breaks or having lunch.

Jake and Harry busied themselves putting in order every VR rooms, restocking the VR store, and doing some maintenance for the few VR gears that had been defective lately. At 9:00 am, Camille walked out from her office and announced to them that the competition was indeed canceled until further notice.

Hooray! They could relax now. They exchanged jokes in the staff room around a cup of coffee, not expecting any customers at all. It was a boring morning.

Camille had this boss air that made it impossible for them to talk to her normally. Their dirty jokes were swallowed back and they didn't dare to talk about topics that only nerds had the secret.

Xi didn't say a word either. Coaching proposed many times some random challenges that his System had judged as great opportunities but were in fact just ways to torture him.

It could be something like 'Run 10km, do 100 push-ups, 100 pull-ups, 100 squats, and 100 sit-ups', but there were also some requests much more terrifying. For example, when Camille was drinking coffee with them, Coaching proposed him to maintain eye contact with her for at least 20 seconds. Can you imagine how creepy he would seem to her if he really did that? The funny thing was that there were true benefits to get from this 'trial'.

Rewards:

- Self-confidence: +2%
- Communication skill: +1%
- Smhafi frkauow: -10%
- Authority level: +1% (Rank up at 100%)
- Camille will see you in a new light

This tantalizing reward was only obtainable if Camille put an end first to their eye contact. His stare also had to be confident but not forceful, otherwise, he would pass for a shy nerd deeply in love with her or at worst a disgusting pervert. If he failed, he was condemned to feel a deep shame that would probably let him embarrassed for days.

Did he succeed? No, he failed miserably. He broke eye contact after 1.3 seconds. He couldn't see her, but he had the feeling Xi facepalmed herself watching him. He could feel the Punishment meaning:

- Self-confidence: -2%

It was unsettling how the Oracle could quantify these emotions and states of mind, but it was undoubtedly accurate. If he followed the Coach's suggestions he could

probably solve his social anxiety problem in a few days. Most phobias could easily be solved like that after all.

Feeling shameful, he excused himself justifying that the VR store needed someone to watch over it. He envisaged taking a nap to forget, lying down with his feet on the reception desk. However, the outside ring tone announcing new customers rang out not even ten minutes after he started to relax. At the same time, the Coach gave him his first real mission. A mission, that made his eyes pop out of his head when he saw it.

[Mission: Take care of this customer as if it was your soul mate!]
