

# The Oracle Paths

## Volume 1: The Oracle

### Chapter 14 – The customer is king

‘Ruby Hale?’ If a god existed somewhere, it truly had a dark humor. Hale? She was disabled. A ruby? Who were they trying to dupe? Perhaps her mother had a nice sense of humor too. Or she just wanted the best for her daughter, perfectly knowing that she wouldn’t see her grow up.

Jake could be quite harsh with his thoughts, but he was not stupid. Such mutations could only be caused by excessive radiation. If her mother was still alive right now that would be a miracle considering the state of her daughter.

‘All right Ruby! That’s a beautiful name. You can take your pick, as all the rooms are available at the moment. I don’t think we will see any other customers today.’ He said, trying to stay polite but cordial.

‘Then, can I have a full immersion room?’ She inquired, a little giddy with excitement.

‘Yes, you can. We have three rooms like this. If I may ask, why would you need such a room? Even people using them often turn off the room’s special effects to avoid being distracted when they’re playing. I thought you were here for the qualifying rounds?’ Jake asked, a little bit curious.

Ruby looked at him as if she was not sure if he was serious or not.

‘You work in a VRGF center and had never played VR games with all the environment simulators activated?’ She was truly doubtful now. Was there really someone playing VR games so wrongly?

‘I ceased playing VR games (without cheating that is) a long time ago. How could I enjoy playing a game that needs me to run for hours to, in the end, lose against some cheaters sat on a couch in a relaxed way? Where is the fun in this?’

Now, Ruby was really staring at him as if he truly was an idiot.

‘You mean, you have never tried to play a VR game just to relax or experience something new?’

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‘Mmm, I don’t think so.’ He answered sincerely.

‘You should! You have no idea what you’re missing.’ Her eyes now showed some pity, as if he was an abandoned child having lost his way.

‘Well, there is no customer apart from you, so I could as well follow your advice and try one this afternoon.’

‘Why not now? I can show you my favorite simulation game. You will definitely have fun! I need help anyway to equip the VR gear and attach myself correctly.’ She proposed to him.

Jake thought about her suggestion for a few seconds. He didn’t want to experience anything at the moment. He was originally planning to take a nap before her arrival. But if he refused, he would definitely fail the mission as the shadow guide wanted him to accept.

Whatever... He could as well follow the Path until the end. Despite her ugliness, she was easy going and easy to talk to. At least, he didn’t feel any bad intention.

‘All right! I will try, but that’s really just to make you happy as I’m pretty sure my opinion about this won’t change.’ He still expressed a reservation.

After this, Jake politely proposed to push her wheelchair to one of the VR rooms and she willingly accepted, visibly used to being assisted during her previous VR center visits.

‘If it is not too personal, are you always coming alone? I am sure I have never seen you here before.’ He asked, trying to make conversation.

‘It is my first time in this center. My aunt is here at New Paris for a business trip, so I came with her. As she is busy, I took a cab alone.’ She explained.

‘Mmm, I see. That’s why you have such a British accent. After the Earth Government establishment, most French learned how to speak English, using French less and less, but our accent is still quite easy to distinguish.’

‘Yes, most languages are disappearing fast with the new Earth Government. It is surprising no countries fight for their cultural identity. It would have been unthinkable a few decades ago. Now English, Chinese and Russian have become the dominant languages as they are ruling the Earth in turns.’

‘Well, these languages haven’t vanished yet. Old people don’t adapt so easily and many families use their native language at home.’ Jake assured her it wouldn’t be so fast for the Earth to be united under one tongue.

Jake opened for her the VR room she had chosen, letting her put down her jacket on one of the resting seats in the room. In spite of the summer heatwave, Ruby had a cold body, unable to warm up.

‘Now I need you to help me equipping the VR gear.’ She reminded him with a shy voice.

‘Oh, ok... It is just the first time I have to help someone to equip this, so I’m not sure how I should proceed.’ He admitted slightly embarrassed.

‘No worries! It’s quite simple.’ She promised with a confident tone. ‘Just pass me the VR suit and let me get changed.’

‘Oh, ah yes I need to go out, of course...’

Jake waited patiently outside the VR room for his customer to finish changing herself. When she called him, he walked back inside.

‘Then, what should I do now?’ He asked for the next step.

‘Just bring my wheelchair on the treadmill under the straps hanging from the ceiling of the VR capsule.’

Jake obeyed, pushing her to the right position.

‘Ok, now I need you to attach the straps to my VR suit. Once it is done, adjust the straps’ length so that I’m not too close to the ground. I can do it myself if you carry me for a few seconds.’ She suggested, her face going red.

Jake awkwardly took her in his arms, princess carry style. Ruby was very light and bony according to his fingers’ feedback where they touched her body. As ugly and handicapped as she was, he couldn’t help himself but think how nice she smelled. It was a scent very different from the deathly one he expected.

If he had one bad sense to mention, that would be his sense of smell. For that matter, the Oracle Status was formal about this. His perception stat was 10 points as every healthy male, but when he had looked at his sub-attributes, he had discovered his sense of smell only had 7 points. His sight and hearing were above average, though.

To return to the subject, she smelled nice, but he was unable to describe this fragrance, even less put a name on it. He wouldn’t recognize the scent of roses if he smelled it, even less so a complex perfume like this one. All he could say was that it reminded him in a way the fragrance of red berries.

Ruby quickly adjusted the straps’ length, then did a double knot, showing how experienced she was.

‘You can let go of me now. It should hold just fine.’

Jake released her body. She was now hanging in the air thanks to the straps.

‘You said, you were here for the qualifying rounds, right? Then how were you supposed to compete without legs?’

Jake realized after asking that his question was a bit too personal, but he had worried for nothing. Ruby didn’t seem to care at all.

‘I only play Mage classes that can fly. Disabled people can fill in a form when playing VR games to explain the nature of their handicap. Most games adjust the gameplay like this depending on your disabilities.’

‘It makes sense.’ He nodded with an expression of understanding.

‘So what simulation game am I supposed to try with you?’ He asked again.

‘That’s a surprise. Change in a VR suit then tie yourself up exactly like I did. Put a VR helmet, then I will invite you in the game.’ She explained.

When it came to the games she loved, Ruby was quite confident and decisive.

Slightly expectant now, Jake hurried in another simulation room. The main difference with normal VR rooms was that they could simulate rain, wind, sand and so on. For this, the multidirectional treadmill, the walls, and ceiling of the capsule needed to be built differently. They needed to be porous to facilitate the passage of air, water or any other matters improving the immersion.

Once fully equipped and tied up, he turned on the VR helmet. He logged with his real name. Even, if Ruby didn’t know it, he was the only other person online in the center. After a while, he received Ruby’s invitation.

‘Invitation accepted.’