

The Oracle Paths

Volume 1: The Oracle

Chapter 20 - A new hope

There was a common trait found in most intelligent people. A lot of thinking, little action. 'Blessed are the simple-minded' was not a saying that just happened to exist. There was obviously a basis for this claim.

People who were a little bit dumber than average, or sometimes just men of action, were naturally less concerned about the implications behind their actions. They did not ask themselves the question 'Am I wasting my time' or 'How many others have failed before me?' They were content to take action, letting themselves be carried along by the flow.

The procrastinators were all, without exception, great thinkers. It took a minimum of intelligence to constantly question the meaning of one's objectives, to put them into perspective and then to ignore them. Most of them were lunatics, planning complex plans to achieve their goals, often also quite perfectionist. Yet, when the time came to take action for good, these people deflated, finding all sorts of excuses.

There were two simple reasons for this. The fear of failure, which was logically proportional to the immensity of the task at hand, and the feeling of futility, which could be summed up by the question 'What's the point?'

Jake was suffering from the second case. If you fed your imagination of invincible superheroes, completely overpowered protagonists becoming stronger and faster by applying simple precepts like 'no pain no gain', you were doomed to despair. Add to that an outlet in the form of video games and s and you ended up with

someone like Jake. A person that nothing could motivate, because after all, it wasn't worth it.

'Xi? I thought that if there was a Path, it meant that the rewards were earned for good. Why did my stats drop after a simple day of rest?' Jake complained like a cranky kid whose lollipop had just been snatched.

[Are you serious?] Xi growled with undisguised disdain. [Could you tell me in detail the recipe for the first stew the Path made you cook?]

Jake gasped, realizing the uncertainty he'd chosen to ignore all along was now being thrown back in his face.

'How could I? It's been three weeks, I've been cooking non-stop, cramming all kinds of boring stuff, without ever once having a moment for myself.'

'Of course, I forgot. I vaguely remember a few steps, like chopping onions or meat, but most stews tend to look the same anyway. The proportions of spices, the exact sequence, I have no idea.'

[As you said, you have forgotten. You're only human after all.] Xi reminded him in a sympathetic voice.

[Naturally, this is reflected in your statistics. Or maybe you were hoping the Oracle would take pity on you and inflate your levels of knowledge to clear your conscience?]

Jake sensed a headache coming. For fuck's sake, he had an IQ over 140, not 40. Of course, he had thought about that. But what was he supposed to do about it? Give up even before he started? He could be stupid sometimes, but he wasn't so senile yet that he forgot the world was going to hell.

'Is it possible to at least retain what I've learned? Not wasting weeks of effort in a matter of days?' Jake wondered aloud.

[Sure, it can be done. You forget because your brain's memory capacity is limited, as is your attention span.] Xi explained in a bored tone.

A glimmer of hope lit up Jake's eyes.

'Thank you, Sherlock! Then how many points of intelligence would I need to not forget anything?'

[That's a harder question than it sounds. The intelligence shown on your status is calculated by including many cognitive functions. Memory is only one of those variables. The formula is not that simple.]

[If the amount of information you can retain doubles, your intelligence can double as well in practice, if your thinking-ability follows. However, if your reaction speed doubles, your intelligence won't necessarily double in this case.]

[Take the example of a cat. No matter how long it tries to capture the red light of a laser, it will never understand that the light source comes from somewhere else. A faster brain wouldn't make any difference. That's a fundamental limitation. A better memory, on the other hand, might help him realize that something is wrong. Or at least, if it does, the cat will remember it.]

'Uh, please, Xi, just give me a number...' Jake begged, vainly hoping to be spared from another lecture.

[If I consider that your brain is evolving uniformly, I'd say at least 200 points. You'll still forget over time because the brain has limited storage capacity, but it will be negligible.]

Jake was stunned. 200 points meant so much intelligence that the world's greatest geniuses would look like a bunch of retards. That equated to an IQ of 2,000. Considering his cognitive faculties were in balance, it was terrifying.

His memory would be twenty times better by default, but so would his concentration and understanding. In reality, this would translate into a much higher learning capacity than that number.

‘Fuck, is that even possible? Checking for Paths to become invincible or dominate the Universe, that was the first thing I did. And the answer? Nothing, nada, niet.’ Jake became enraged by this underhanded move from Xi.

[Authority insufficient] Xi responded with the same casual tone.

But to his surprise, it was that hated response that calmed Jake. He had just become aware of an absurdity in the oracle’s workings.

‘When I make irrational wishes like developing superhuman intelligence no Path is generated. Instead, if I ask Xi, she sends me back to my insufficient level of authority. Where’s the catch?’

That was the crux of the matter. He’d already seen first-hand that the Oracle wasn’t infallible. There was at least one wild mouse laughing in its face. So, was the absence of Paths really a sign that it was impossible? Not necessarily. There was still the possibility that the Paths were not presented to him, as they were considered impossible or fatal.

‘Xi, the Paths I am thinking of, do they exist or am I wasting my time?’ He asked one last time, just to confirm it once and for all.

[Raise the rank of your Oracle, and I might be able to give you some answers. But remember that sometimes ignorance is a bliss].

Xi had literally just admitted that he wasn’t just deluding himself so he could regain some semblance of hope. The depression that had gripped Jake that day, and was on the verge of making him fall back into his old vices, was gone.

He now had only one goal: to raise the damn experience gauge to 100% in order to increase his rank, which was still zero, to rank one. Only then could he start planning his future.

So his first good idea was to get back to work. Jake had long noticed that the Oracle was rewarding him with a fraction of the experience needed each time he reached a milestone in the pursuit of his Paths.

The only downside was that reaching the next rank required finishing almost all the Paths in progress. Going to the end of the Path based on physical training could not be done in less than six months. If he decided to cram all day long, he could probably learn the rest of the books on the list in a few weeks. Unfortunately, 40 plus 30% was only 70%. With the 5% he earned from having fun with Ruby, he was still 25% short.

The only missions he had left out so far were those that were aimed at correcting his social skills and improving his charisma. Not because they were long or painful, but precisely because they forced him to make a type of effort that he found a million times more awful than training in the gym.

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Therefore, he decided, it was finally time to go to that bloody hairdresser. It would be the first step to build the image of his brand new self.

These three weeks of drastic training had

at least the merit of completely changing his morphology. He hadn't lost much weight on the scale, but the fat had given way to muscles. Many might have thought of doping at the beginning of the 21st century, but with the technology of the 2100s, it wasn't so shocking. It was still unbelievable though.

His mane of hair was longer and more tangled than ever, but at least physically, he now had a certain bearing. His skin was much clearer, his eyes were brighter, and his body was well defined without looking massive. To be honest, he had never looked better.

Oh, and there was one last detail. Jake was rich now. Instead of getting his money back after three days, as the Path had recommended at first, he had instead taken the trouble to be patient and let his money grow.

The result was what he had hoped for. The impact of a Warp Drive engine was far more impressive than he originally imagined. Investors all wanted a piece of the pie, and his stock price hit the roof in an instant.

With his depressive episode over, Jake realized for the first time that he was a millionaire and a handsome young man with a bright future ahead of him.