

# The Oracle Paths

## Volume 1: The Oracle

### Chapter 21 – Meet an acquaintance

The sun was at its zenith, the afternoon having just begun. Jake may have wasted his morning wallowing, but now that he was on the right track, there was no turning back.

He packed his gym clothes and sneakers, didn't forget to take his credit card and some cash, and went to the fitness center while doing his usual jog.

His physical metamorphosis was palpable. The few kilometers he struggled to complete without spitting out his lungs were as grueling as ever, but it took him much less time to get to his fitness center. He also sweated much less and caught his breath more quickly.

Jake was gradually becoming aware of the sidelong glances he was getting. New gym members saw him as a regular, while the regulars were amazed to find that his headless training had paid off.

A few chicks that came to the gym to maintain their precious bodies were giving him teasing glances. Still as introverted as ever, he chose to look right through them, going straight to the barber shop.

The latter was just one of a long list of stores that had found in this sports center an occasion to make a profit. Perfume shop, pharmacy, health food or clothing stores, no space was wasted.

The shop window seen from the outside was somewhat standard, with photos of models with unlikely haircuts and some posters or display products to please the sponsors.

Jake strode into the hair salon with a resolute look on his face. He was still sweating a little but clearly the Coach had not advised him to take a shower, so why bother?

If it didn't earn him experience points, it probably wouldn't have any decisive impact whether he was clean or not.

And indeed, it turned out to be irrelevant. Once inside, the hairdressing salon turned out to be rather spacious and well-lit. The equipment looked new, the leather armchairs and worktops were impeccable as well.

There was only a couch and a few magazines to wait, though the salon turned out to be empty. Two middle-aged hairdressers were enjoying their moment of respite; chatting over a cup of coffee.

These women had emaciated faces, clearly affected by the recent upheavals brought about by the Alien ship. Some, like Jake, saw the arrival of the Oracles as a blessing, while for others the bracelets only meant misfortune and misery.

Their society had been turned upside down by these devices, revolutionizing their lifestyles. They had lost customers, the most demanding of them going directly to the professionals the Oracle considered more competent.

Including those who were terrified and confined within their own homes, these hairdressers had seen their salaries cut by more than half.

When they heard the front door squeak, revealing a handsome young man with enough hair to give free rein to their creativity, they were all too ready to give it a go.

Their greedy eyes sparkled with joy, like a hungry predator before a fat prey. Their first big catch since the beginning of the week.

Jake, unaware of the excitement his arrival had just triggered, said a shy 'Hello' before sitting on the couch to await his turn.

Tvu wmpreulo vfaztzulluz, ovmpev rmo ypaou lm dzulv uaovuz, hfqu pn om vaq jaov f juihmqare lqaiu.

Unfortunately, her yellow teeth ruined her good intentions, testifying to her smoking habits. When you had an idea of the price of a packet of cigarettes in the 22nd century, you could immediately understand her plight.

‘Hello, handsome. What can I do for you?’ She said in a formal tone.

Even her perfume reeked. Jake loved citrus like everyone else, but when that smell occurred in a public place, it reminded him more of toilet deodorant.

‘Hello. Well, you only have to look at the top of my head to know why I’m here. A functional cut will do the trick. A little length at the top, tapered at the sides.’

Jake hated going to the hairdresser, but that was precisely why he knew exactly what to ask for. He did not give a damn about current trends, nor the hairdresser’s advice.

‘All right, will you follow me, sir,’ She said, showing him the way.

She took him to another section at the back of the barber shop, which was initially out of his sight.

Other armchairs leaning against special sinks were lined up next to each other, with many mirrors on the opposite wall so that you could watch yourself shamefully get off on a complete stranger shampooing your hair.

To his surprise, another customer was already waiting on one of the chairs, with the characteristic blank stare of a person communicating with his Oracle AI.

Tvu vfaztzulluzl vft iudo vaq ar ovu ipzhv jvaiu ovuw daralvut ovuaz emllan ukhvfreu.

The real surprise, however, was that he recognized the person in question. It was Paul Baker, another of his co-workers. Having not come to work at the virtual reality arcade center, Jake hadn’t seen him for almost a month.

Paul was once the seducer of their gang of nerds. From his 190 cm height, he was the classic handsome dark-haired man who made the ladies fall in love with him. He had a charming smile and knew how to be helpful. Given that he was also a professional VR player, he was the perfect charismatic employee.

Well, that was all in the past. The Paul Baker sitting in front of him was quite different. Unlike him, who had lost his cowardly physique, Paul had lost weight in an alarming way. The once robust fellow was now almost too scrawny for his own good.

His eyes were sunken in their sockets, with large bags underneath showing how sleep-deprived he was. His hands grasping the arm of the armchair were trembling slightly, evidence of an excess of caffeine.

‘Paul? Is that you? What’s happened to you?’ Asked Jake, shocked to see him so weakened.

The young man turned his head towards him when he heard his voice, his eyes flashing suddenly. As he contemplated his former colleague’s new appearance, he couldn’t help but breathe a long sigh.

‘Hi, Jake. As you can see, I’ve had better days. I’m glad to see that things seem to be going well for you.’

‘I want you to know that our meeting here today is no accident. It was my Oracle that led me here. Of course, I also needed to freshen up my hair, so I might as well kill two birds with one stone.’

Jake was well aware that he could be included in someone else’s predictions. Still, it was confusing to be part of Paul’s Path. They may have been co-workers in the past, but they had never been friends.

As a self-respecting introverted nerd, he was running away like the plague from this kind of radiant individual. Apart from Harry, who was like him, and Camille,

who was a hottie and his direct supervisor, he truly didn't give a damn about anyone else.

Anyway, Jake had come in for a haircut, and he had no intention of changing his plan. So he slumped into one of the chairs to Paul's right, and could now watch his reflection in the mirror as much as he wanted.

Meanwhile, the hairdressers had finished their coffee break and were ready to get to work.

They put on a pair of latex gloves, pressed their heads against the sink and turned on the taps. Once the water was hot enough, they soaked the boys' hair and then brushed them with shampoo. To earn their rates, they massaged their scalps for longer than they should have, making them grunt with satisfaction. Even Paul seemed to relax.

After that, the hairdressers moved them into the main workroom. Perhaps because they were relieved to have two clients at once, they showed great professionalism, showing all their expertise.

Paradoxically, Paul, who was used to sophisticated and trendy cuts, asked for the same functional cut as Jake. His former colleague was like a stranger.

During the entire performance, the two young men remained silent. When the hairdressers finished their task, a huge mass of hair was scattered on the tile floor and he felt as if his head was lighter.

Jake then paid his hairdresser, leaving a generous tip, and left with Paul on his heels.

After that, Jake continued following his Path as though nothing had happened.

He did his training just like the other days, replicating the gestures of his Shadow Guide with absolute confidence. Paul, for his part, did not stop him.

Tvu vfrtlmqv dmzquz gmw jfohvut vaq qfcu fii ovmlu lozfreu qmsuqurol jaov f ovmpevodpi immc. Al ad vu jfl jmrtuzare fgmpo ovu tadduzurhu guojuur ovuaz zulnuhoasu jfwl md hmnare jaov fii ovulu opzqmai.

In the end, when Jake was drenched in sweat and totally out of energy, Paul finally made up his mind.

‘I’m having a party at my house tonight. I’d like you to come. Harry, Thiru and even Camille will be there.’ He revealed his true purpose, leaving Jake dubious.

Given Paul’s condition, he clearly didn’t look like he was in the mood. Besides, he and Harry had never been invited to any of his previous parties. What was different this time?

‘Sorry, I ref—‘

[Mission: Party at Paul Baker’s house]

[Potential rewards: ]

[-Learning about the mouse, meeting people, seducing Camille]

[- Communication skills +1 , Self-confidence +1 ]

[-Level of Authority: +5%]

‘...‘

Coaching had just decided otherwise.

‘What is it, Jake? Something’s come up?’ Checked Paul, slightly worried.

‘No, everything’s fine. Okay for tonight, I’ll be there.’

With those words, they parted. This proposal was unexpected, but it had the merit of aligning with his plans. After all, what better way to improve social skills than with a party?

