

# The Oracle Paths

## Volume 2: The First Ordeal

### Chapter 41 - Sit down and spread your legs

The Playboy stared at the inside of his wrist with an empty mind, asking himself all sorts of questions. He hadn't seen the man move. Just felt his wrist and thumb twist in a direction his joints weren't designed for.

As the adrenaline subsided, a stabbing pain had taken over. The good news, however, was that despite being brutalized against his will, the savage had restrained himself. He was in pain, but he didn't have a fracture or a sprain.

He realized that at no time had his tormentor let his guard down in their presence. He had always been prepared for the worst. A nervous laugh of acceptance invaded him. This time he had really lost face in front of his groupies. But at least he had learned a hard lesson. Never underestimate your enemies.

Aslael hadn't budged from the beginning until the end of the confrontation. Seeing that the show was over, he began to give them some final advice.

'This gift may seem unfair, but it came from my own pocket. The Oracle doesn't do welfare.' The Instructor justified himself shamelessly.

'However, I'm in a good mood, so I'm going to do charity work for today.'

A ring of red light shone again from his own right wrist and from it gleamed a handful of red crystals no bigger than peas. Enough to give one to each person.

The crystals levitated up to them at face level, waiting to be caught. When Jake received his, he was able to confirm with his System that they were worth 1 Strength Aether point. He immediately absorbed the Aether into his body, the

crystal reverting back to a simple inert diamond which he stored in his bag. His Strength Aether stat now peaked at 13.

‘Now that you are all ready, I wish you all good luck. Perhaps one day we will meet again.’

Before they could ask one more question, the clownish looking Instructor leapt into the beam of blue light and disappeared. Still, they were given a piece of advice they could have done without:

‘Try to avoid dying too soon.’ Aslael’s voice sounded one last time before the blue light beam went out for good, plunging the top of the snowy hill on which they were standing into darkness and silence, plunging the temperature by several degrees.

After the light beam disappeared, the brightness dropped several notches. Even though it was past noon at the most according to Jake’s estimate and the sky was empty of clouds, the contrast had still made him lose his bearings.

It took a minute for his pupils to get used to the daylight. When he could see properly again, he picked up his package, woke Crunch up, and started striding down the hill without giving a glance to the group of doomed people behind him.

The Playboy, and most of the group behind him, sighed with relief as he left, happy to get off so lightly. Especially the Playboy for threatening him with his Colt.

At least he would remain the leader of this group as long as he had a few bullets left. There were still nine bullets available, plus the three that the stranger had unloaded from the barrel of his Colt before returning it to him.

One might wonder why a young man would carry a gun and so many spare bullets in a shopping mall before being transported back here. The answer was simple: He wasn’t smart, but savvy enough to notice how quickly the order had degenerated after the Oracle devices appeared.

However, even before he regained his customary arrogance, he heard:

‘Wait!’ Yelled a shallow voice, but loud enough to reach Jake’s ear.

He stopped walking and turned halfway around to stare at the woman who had called out to him. The youngest woman in the group was facing him. She had run behind him to catch him. Not far behind her, however, stood the man in the suit with glasses.

The young woman’s heart was pounding, afraid to talk to this demon armed to the teeth. At least that’s how she saw him, so impressed had he been when he had disarmed the Playboy. On the contrary, the man in the suit remained calm, but there was an expectation in his eyes.

‘What is it?’ Jake asked quietly, his expression totally neutral, neither friendly nor hostile.

He could hardly imagine that a few months earlier he was unable to hold his gaze with a woman his age. He was still socially awkward, but emotionally he was now completely detached.

Although she feared that he would ignore her, when he replied she was so surprised that she forgot what she wanted to ask him.

‘I... You...’ She babbled, trying to pull herself together.

But her efforts proved futile. Fear held her and prevented her from reasoning normally. Fortunately, the man in the suit came to her rescue, like a hero from heaven to save the damsel in distress.

‘I think what she wants to ask is, ‘May I come with you?’. Of course my question is the same.’ He affirmed, putting his glasses back on in a gesture probably repeated thousands of times.

Taking another look at the young woman, he saw the relief in her posture when she managed to convey her message, even though someone else had said it for her.

Nusuzovuiull, Jfcu tat rmo arourt om fhhuno oval uflaiw. Hu tat rmo vfsu oaqu om tufi jaov ojm gpzturl. Hmjusuz, vu jfl rmo aqqmzfi uaovuz, usur ovmpcv vu tat rmo arourt om lfhzadahu vaqluid dmz lozfreuzl.

In a world where risk and courage were rewarded, one could not survive simply by seeking the protection of the strong. You had to become strong yourself. And if those two people didn't have that ambition in them, he wouldn't accept them.

'Why?' He simply asked, staring at each of them in turn with an inquisitive gaze.

'Because... Because you're strong.' She replied in a determined tone.

'I'll have a better chance of surviving if I can follow you. I promise, I won't ask for anything, I'll just follow you, I'll learn to survive quietly without making any noise. But if I stay in the other group I... I've never been scouting or hiking or camping after all... Frankly, I won't last two days on my own, and I have enough sense to know they don't know any better than I do.'

'Hmm, I reckon that's an acceptable answer.' Jake agreed after weighing the pros and cons.

'What about you?' He asked turning his attention to the gentleman in the suit.

'What about me?' The businessman retorted with an air of defiance.

'Isn't it obvious? As the lady said so well, you only have to look at me to know that I have no experience of survival in the wilderness, and sure enough, neither do the others. Besides, it doesn't take a genius to understand that when the other fool runs out of bullets, the first Digestor we come across will eat us alive.'

'Like her, I understand that you're not a Samaritan. Nothing is free in this world like in ours. You mustn't forget that I'm a businessman first and foremost, and a good one at that. My wallet can attest to that. »

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The Playboy, like the rest of the group, were too far away to hear what he was saying, but they felt a twinge of sadness when they saw him squandering all that money.

‘I guess that answer will do the trick, too.’ Jake approved.

‘Before we get started, here are my rules. They’re non-negotiable. First, I can teach you how to fish, but you get no fish from me. Second, if you slow me down, I won’t hesitate to give you up. Third, I advise you to get rid of those clothes the first chance you get. In case you haven’t noticed, the climate, like the temperatures here, is not stable.

‘And those jeans... they’ll slow me down.’

The young woman swallowed when she heard him mention it. Indeed, her tight jeans had a small range of motion and were irritating her inner thighs.

The hours of walking that had taken her to the top of the hill had left their marks. Her inner thighs were on fire and blood, and she had struggled hard to climb with such inflexible jeans, not to mention the cold that did not help.

With her sleeveless top, she had been shivering for quite a while. If she hadn’t already caught a cold, it wouldn’t be long now unless she climbed off that hill soon.

A knife plunged into the snow right in front of her feet, which made her jump and make a cute squeaking sound.

‘Make sure it doesn’t slow me down.’ Jake commanded, always in a neutral tone, not tolerating discussion. ‘Same thing for...?’

‘Williams Hopkins, but you can call me Will.’ The man in the suit introduced himself in a formal tone.

‘Nice to meet you, Will. Will, these shoes might slow us down too and hurt you if they don’t already. Unfortunately, I don’t have a viable solution at the moment, so you’ll have to deal with it, but equally, don’t slow me down.’

‘That goes without saying.’ William confirmed without showing the slightest sign of weakness. He understood the rules of the game. What was the value of one or two blisters against life.

Meanwhile, the young woman contemplated the knife, still wondering what she was supposed to do with it. Seeing this, Jake sighed a long sigh. He walked over to her, picked up the knife, and ordered:

‘Sit down and spread your legs.’