

# The Oracle Paths

## Volume 2: The First Ordeal

### Chapter 72 - Recruitment campaign

It wasn't long before the first questions were asked. The humans remaining after that night were not the most belligerent and therefore this question and answer session went off without a hitch.

The first question was the one that everyone had on their lips. 'What exactly was the Ordeal?' The answer was predictable, but at the same time more complex than they expected.

'It's a test, but it's a long-term one. At least it was for us.' Cho Min-Ho tried to explain in clear and concise words.

'The Red Cube sends you into a world that is completely random, but one that echoes our culture, history, myths and legends. We were all sent to the same place, but I can assure you that the world you will be sent to will not be the same.'

The explanation raised more questions than it answered. Did these worlds exist, or was it some sort of video game that created a whole open world out of thin air? This was the second question he was asked immediately afterwards.

'I am incapable of answering you.' The Korean star replied succinctly. 'The Oracle System will tell you the terms of the Ordeal, your mission and the various conditions you will be subject to. On the surface, it sounds like a game. But once you get there, you won't be so sure.'

‘One thing that is true, though, is that you can’t actually die in the first four Ordeals. As you can see, we got out of the Red Cube in three times. The first wave of people were actually those who were killed in their ordeal.’

Which explained why all these people looked like crap and were disoriented. Dying, even for fakes, must have been a memorable experience if everything was or seemed perfectly real out there.

The third question everyone wondered was ‘How long does the Ordeal last?’. Again the answer was ambivalent.

‘Well, it depends for whom and in relation to whom.’ Min-Ho sighed, giving sympathetic nods to some of the members of his original group.

‘For you on the outside, the Ordeal lasted only one day. So we went into the Red Cube yesterday morning and came out this morning a day later. On the inside it’s different...’

‘What’s different?’ Someone dared to ask, while the crowd held its breath.

‘For anyone who has passed the initial conditions of the Ordeal, it lasts at least two months. The mission itself isn’t particularly difficult if you don’t make any major mistakes, but it’s extremely painful. The first four Ordeals are tutorials to prepare you for the real Ordeals of tomorrow, and rightly so! You won’t have time to relax.’

‘If you die during the ordeal, according to the information I’ve just gathered, you will exit the Red Cube along with the others who have passed, feeling as if you were killed just seconds ago. In other words, your body and your mind are out of time.’

‘And for those who succeed beyond the initial conditions of the Ordeal?’ Another person, confident in his strength, asked with a strong African accent. It was Yerode, the leader of the mercenaries.

Cho Min-Ho and his two bodyguards spent a few seconds assessing the person in front of them. Among influential people, they knew how to recognize another leader when they met one. All three of them could sense that this individual was not a good person, with a lot of blood on his hands, but they didn’t care.

‘If you succeed in the initial mission. The mission can be extended. To what extent, I don’t know... Several more months, it’s possible.’

‘How long did you and your guards last?’ This time it was Lamine, the sniper, who asked his question.

‘This answer... I refuse to answer it.’ Cho Min-ho answered with a slight smile, but his eyes were not laughing. ‘Any other questions?’

The tension in the air was palpable. Despite his frail appearance, this Cho Min-Ho was definitely tougher than he wanted to make believe. After all, he had come out with the third wave.

A long interrogation ensued, with everyone asking the questions that were on their minds. Cho Min-Ho, his two bodyguards, and some of his allies took turns explaining the course of their Ordeal, complementing each other when information was missing.

Apparently, the humans had found themselves immersed in a medieval world reminiscent of ancient England, in the midst of a conflict with a neighboring kingdom. Their starting points were often similar, but different at the same time.

Some were part of the enemy kingdom, others were servants, slaves, or recruits in training. Whatever role or identity they obtained, they

were given the physical characteristics, skills and information necessary to fulfill their role.

Depending on whether the participant was a child, a pregnant woman or an elderly person, the Ordeal was always difficult, but within the participant's reach. The key point, however, that did not vary was that individuals in this world had an average Aether level of 8pts, 2 points lower than unimproved Earthlings. This Aether level defined the difficulty of the First Ordeal.

It was obvious that this was not England or one of its conquered territories, but another world. The language was different, but they could understand it as if they had been born there, and the names of towns and villages were entirely unrelated with England cities on Earth.

Agriculture was more advanced, as was the water supply and sewage disposal system. The populations were also healthy with good standards of hygiene, far from the catastrophic dental situations and black plague-like epidemics of that period of history.

The rewards of the Ordeal itself were of course the knowledge, training, skills and craftsmanship acquired during this minimum two month period. For those who obtained a better rating, the rewards were unique and abundant. Cho Min-Ho and his two guards refused to reveal theirs, but assured that they were worth all the effort.

They were also warned that some claimed to have encountered monsters or been victims of spells or curses. Their Ordeal was categorized as a Medieval/Fantastic Ordeal. Many of those who had died and failed the Ordeal had been the victim of a supernatural event.

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Others, including Jake again, were eager to take on the challenge. Yerode, Lamine and a few other humans were also determined to get the best possible rewards.

Even Kyle, a big VRMMORPG player on Earth, was pretty excited. At least for the first four Ordeals, the Game Over wouldn't be fatal to him and he could always participate in the next Ordeal. His life would only really be at stake if he reached the Fifth Ordeal, which was a problem he wouldn't have to worry about for a long time.

The last ones were hesitant, torn between the *dèsirè* to become stronger and get the rewards and the *dèsirè* to stay away from danger and difficulty. Cho Min-Ho had naturally anticipated these behaviors by revealing all this to them.

‘Now that all the questions have been answered, I come back to my second motive. That of recruiting.’ He abruptly changed the subject to the field he was in fact interested in.

‘I would like to remind you that these Red Cubes exist in every Oracle city and shelter. If you don't feel ready, I promise to escort you to the nearest city, pay the entrance fee, and provide you with enough Aether to make sure you're fully prepared.’

Jake frowned. It was a tempting offer for all those people who were scared or didn't feel confident about the chances of making it

through the upcoming Ordeal. As he scanned the crowd, he saw a lot of hope in people's eyes, but also hesitation and mistrust.

If Yerode's group had not exploited or attacked all these people the night before, his recruitment campaign could have been a great success.

'What guarantee do we have that you're telling the truth, that we won't just be expendable pawns?' A pudgy woman, a few months pregnant, dared to ask in a shrill fishmonger's voice.

As if he was waiting for this question, the Korean star answered with a cordial smile, devoid of arrogance.

'Because anyone who joins my group will immediately be given 10 Red Crystals.'

The crowd gasped when they heard these words. For anyone who didn't even have the spine to kill a Digestor lvl 0, it was an incredible amount of money.

'In addition, an Aether wage will also be given to you if you serve me well. There are only two rules in my group. First, recognize my authority and orders as absolute. Of course, if one day you wish to leave the group, you will not be asked for any compensation, I promise.'

Jake snickered with disdain inside. Those last words were just empty rhetoric. If they really wanted to leave, he doubted it would be so simple after giving them so much. But he was one of the few who thought so. Most were just thinking about the present. If he really gave them everything he promised, why would they ever want to leave one day?

‘The second rule is that you must give me 50% of the Aether you make. Think of it as a social contribution. This Aether will then be used to pay you, according to a salary grid that I will reveal soon. Of course, I will be subject to these rules as well. ‘

Those who thought they could obtain Aether on their own gave up the idea of joining his group after this second rule was announced. But once again, Cho Min-Ho had planned a parade.

‘Don’t underestimate such a rule. The stronger you are, the more you’ll benefit from it. No matter how well you perform, how much Aether can you get on your own? If this new organisation ends up with millions of members, your salary in Aether Crystals could far exceed that amount.‘

True enough. If this group gained enough members, they could set exorbitant salaries for those in the highest positions. In a world where might made right, those able to get a lot of Aether on their own would undoubtedly be pampered.

Joining one of these organizations in its early days would certainly be more rewarding than joining it later, when its power and hierarchy would be well established.

‘ So? Anyone interested in joining my faction ?‘

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His recruitment campaign was a success.