

The Oracle Paths

Volume 1: The Oracle

Chapter 23 – Paul’s story (part 1)

Although Thiru’s physical transformation was impressive, it wasn’t enough to destabilize Jake, since after all he didn’t care about almost anything. However, if someone claimed that the Oracle had no hand in it, he would refuse to believe it.

After the reunion, the group of friends joined the rest of the guests, beginning a new series of introductions.

Camille Ells, his superior was also present. A tight black evening gown had replaced her usual suit, giving her a much more sexy and comely look. Dressed like this, she looked more approachable, less haughty, as if the distance between the boss and his employees had disappeared.

Besides Camille, there were about twenty people he didn’t know, all of them Paul’s friends or acquaintances. One only had to look at these guests to realize how they looked out of place in comparison.

The girls were all gorgeous, dressed like models posing for a parade, while the men were elegant and athletic. Their trendy clothes, plus the few luxury brands he recognized, reflected their affluent social backgrounds.

All these people were chatting among themselves as if they had all known each other for a while. They were probably all longtime friends of Paul’s, sharing the same hobbies.

The fact that Camille was invited was not a surprise in itself. She was hot after all and in the same age bracket as them. That Paul took the initiative to invite Thiru, Harry and him was a real surprise, though. Before today, their relationship had

been limited to work, remaining cordial at best, at worst with barely concealed contempt.

‘Paul, present your friends to me!’ A tall man over two meters tall, with an Afro-European physique, embraced him with a friendly smile.

At first, he seemed nice and enthusiastic about making new friends. However, even someone as uncommunicative as Jake could notice his fleeting glance at Camille’s cleavage.

‘Men, all the same...’ Jake sighed with deep contempt.

[...]

[You know you’re a man too] Xi retorted in an exasperated tone.

Naturally, Jake wisely chose to ignore her. Any man other than him, obviously wasn’t him. Even if he was the one squinting at Camille’s cleavage, it would be excusable. With this kind of wobbly mentality, he could practically justify every one of his actions and freely criticize others without ever suffering a case of conscience.

The 2m giant’s initiative allowed Paul to introduce them to the rest of his friends. Their interactions were polite and some banalities were exchanged.

Nevertheless, one could sense in their attitude that they were wondering since when Paul had been associating with this kind of individuals. Of course, they kept their opinions to themselves. Even among the bourgeoisie of New Paris, owning a big house like this one was not so easy.

There were, however, three people in this group who stood out for their gloomy faces. Like Paul, they were pale and emaciated, and seemed to have lost a lot of weight in a short time.

The first was a young Afro-European boy with dreadlocks about 1.8 meters tall, named Kanye, who was the younger brother of the 2-meter tall giant who first approached them.

The other two were a pair of petite-looking twins named Elisa and Sarah. They had a tanned skin typical of Middle Eastern countries, but their hair was a Venetian blond. They remained rather pretty, but their deep dark circles made them look sickly and not very reassuring.

Of course, if the primary intention of the evening was indeed to have fun and get drunk, it hid another purpose.

Adouz ovu ezmpn vft guepr jfzqare pn om ufhv movuz msuz f duj tzarcl frt ffnuoaxuzl, Pfpj Bfcuz jfsut val vuft fo Jfcu artahfoare ovfo vu lvmpit dmiimj vaq om frmovuz zmmq.

Kanye, Elisa and Sarah accompanied the duo, claiming they wanted to help in the kitchen. Paul had actually planned it, putting pizzas in the oven, which gave him the perfect alibi to isolate himself for a while.

Once in the kitchen, Paul closed the latch, then turned to Jake with a serious expression.

‘First of all, Jake, I want you to know that I know for a fact that you don’t like me and that you don’t care what happens to me.’ He began by making it clear what his true intentions were.

‘The reason I invited you here tonight is that I’m following a Path. Now, let me tell you what I’ve been going through in the last month, so you can understand why the four of us are in this mess.’

Kanye, Sarah and Elisa all had anxious faces and were shaking slightly. It was subtle, but Jake’s trained eye didn’t miss this detail. What they had endured to end up in such a state was a mystery that he had to solve.

‘It began a month ago, a week before the alien ship arrived. To put things in context, none of us were in New Paris when the Oracles appeared. We were on vacation in the Alps, planning to go camping and hiking in the mountains. It was sunny, it was hot, the weather was perfect for that.

‘Our first three days of camping went well. We tested the mountain restaurants, we bathed in the lake after a good day’s walk. Everything turned into a nightmare from the fourth day on.

‘We got lost... ‘

‘Lost?’ Jake couldn’t understand how anyone could get lost in the 22nd century. 13G was accessible everywhere on the planet except perhaps if you were living underground under a thick layer of heavy metals.

Pfpi frt val ovzuu dzaurtl fii laevut fo ovu lfqu oaqu. TvuaZ zuloiull uknzullamrl lvmjut ovfo bplo zuquqguzare ovu usurol qftu ovuq zuiasu ovfo raevoqfzu.

‘We’ve really gotten lost...‘ Paul replied.

‘But it wasn’t our fault!’ Sarah intervened, anxious to justify herself. Jake could tell the twins apart because Elisa had a mole under her right eye.

‘True, but at the time, we didn’t know that.’ Added Kanye, who was the youngest of the group, only 18 years old.

‘Anyway, we were pretty lost.’ Said Paul, continuing his story. ‘We decided to camp out under the stars and we got drunk. Still, it wasn’t our first night camping, and we thought we knew where we were.

‘Except that the next day on waking, we no longer recognized the landscape around us. We remembered a waterfall not far away, which we couldn’t find again, and some rocks with painted signs that were supposed to serve as landmarks for the hikers. On top of that, we had barely left the trail when we pitched our tents.

‘Of course, there was no network, which was supposed to be impossible. The next three days were an ordeal. We wandered up and down the mountain among the fir trees and brush, not finding our way back. We had supplies, but not enough, so it quickly became complicated.

‘Sometimes we’d find a signpost indicating the right road, but we’d end up at dead ends when we followed it. It was the arrival of the Oracles that unblocked the situation.

‘When the drones appeared out of nowhere like a cloud of bugs covering the sky, we panicked and tried to escape. As you can imagine, we got caught. »

The four companions showed their bracelets as proof.

‘At first we were pretty excited. We wanted to go home and the Oracles gave us a Path to follow. We thought the Path would lead us to our car, and then we’d go home safely with it. Unfortunately, it didn’t turn out as we had hoped.

‘We walked for days. At first through the mountains and woods, then one day we reached a good old asphalt road. We all cried that day. After that, we finally reached a small town where we rented a car and we were able to go back to New Paris.

‘ I mean, we should have... We had the same problem as when we were at the campsite. We got lost again. The roads led nowhere, stopping in front of rivers or cliffs. The traffic signs didn’t match the cities we were stopping at. A real ordeal!

‘By following the Path, we were still getting closer to the goal and the AIs on our bracelets were adamant, reminding us over and over again that the Oracle could not be wrong. Seeing the town sign of a city we knew gave us hope, knowing that we were on the right path.

‘This last week was the worst for us. Just so you know, we only made it to New Paris a few days ago...‘

Jake was speechless. Their story looked straight out of a bad science fiction novel.

‘Are you telling me that, aside from the first few days of hiking, you all spent almost three weeks driving to New Paris? How’s that even possible? ‘ He couldn’t help doubting them, it seemed too absurd.

‘ Not only is it true, but there are far worse things. We finally understood why we got lost when we started getting paranoid. By not closing our eyes, we ended up witnessing a disturbing scene, to say the least.

‘We noticed that our landmarks were moving away from us, if not disappearing completely. It was really discreet, the kind of difference you only notice after several hours. When we did notice it, though, it was all we could see.’
