

# The Oracle Paths

## Volume 1: The Oracle

### Chapter 24 - Paul's story (part 2)

[The Oracle Overseer tricked me. They knew all along.] Xi commented with a chilling voice, halfway between despair and anger.

‘What do you mean, he fooled you?’ Jake worried.

[Remember when I told you I hid the fact that the mouse didn’t appear in your Paths?]

‘Of course. It was supposed to be impossible, but you chose not to pass on this information to supposedly buy me some time.’ Jake repeated, still frustrated that he didn’t know why.

[Well, it didn’t do any good. According to your friend Paul’s speech, what I wanted to prevent began before the Oracles even arrived.] Revealed Xi in a sinister tone...

‘You mean to say that from the first time you reported the existence of this mouse, the Oracle Overseer was lying when he said the proof was insufficient?’ »

[Exactly. And I still can’t tell you why this is bad news until you raise your level of authority.]

While Jake and his AI were mentally chatting, Paul and his three friends paused, waiting for his blank stare to refocus on them. When Jake finished his mental conversation, Paul resumed his story.

‘So, as I said, the landmarks we chose were moving. Simply put, our environment was changing all the time, but too slowly for us to notice. At least at first.

‘We finally figured out why the Oracle was making us take all these weird, crazy detours. Basically, all the detours were just to get us back on the normal road.

‘We soon realized that every time our route was abnormally blocked, it meant unknown territory. »

‘ Unknown territory? ‘ Jake frowned.

‘ Indeed. There’s one thing I can vouch for after all we’ve been through. Every time we ventured into one of these lands, not by choice of course, but because the Path demanded it, we left France.

‘Wait, wait, I need to make one thing clear. ‘ Jake stopped him, this time in complete bewilderment.

‘If the phenomenon you describe is true, any satellite should have observed it. Or at least there’s no way the government doesn’t know about it. »

The group of friends laughed hoarsely, but their eyes did not smile. Jake could only read frustration and anguish on their faces.

‘Of course they know...‘ Confirmed Paul. ‘But the situation is more complicated than it seems. You have no idea the interrogation we were subjected to by the military in order to get back to New Paris.

‘We told them the same story we told you, but they weren’t surprised or shocked. They just made us sign a contract that we would keep it secret and one of the generals even answered some of our questions. »

‘Wait a minute! That’s it?’ Jake interrupted him again. ‘They let you in based on your good faith? Seems unthinkable to me. The easiest way to keep it a secret would have been to keep you quarantined outside the city. »

‘They could have, and they did in the beginning. ‘ Paul explained patiently. ‘But that’s no use now. What we went through is happening in New Paris right now. »

Jake pondered over the weight of those words and their implications. He hadn't noticed anything, but aside from practicing and staying home, he hadn't been interested in anything else.

'Do you mean that New Paris is losing pieces or that some strange territories are appearing in the middle of the city? »

'More or less, but the phenomenon is progressing much more slowly. »

'Paul, tell him about the other problems we encountered before returning to New Paris. ' Reminded Kanye. 'Roads cut in half and unknown lands were scary, but never dangerous. »

Elisa and Sarah, the twins, shivered when he mentioned this detail. Clearly, they were not willing to relive this traumatic experience.

' Yeah, we got in trouble. At first, it was nothing bad. It was scary, but it was still within the realm of possibility. We ran into a bear on our hike that totally ignored us, and then a female boar charged us a few days later.

'We had no luck, but we never thought anything was wrong. It was only afterwards that it got worse.

' About a week after the Oracles arrived, we came across our first nightmare. We came across a wolf carcass split in two on the roadside. We thought of all kinds of possibilities, like getting run over or being attacked by a bear, but it didn't look like that. Anyway, we got the hell out of there.

'The second weirdness was when we tried to fill up the gas tank. With the environment making no sense, we were in constant fear of running out of gas. We'd fill up at any station that we saw.

'In the beginning, everything was normal. The small towns or villages where we stopped were normally inhabited, often with a gas station attendant present to greet us when we filled up. Unfortunately, that didn't last. »

‘To be frank, during the last week we spent on the roads, all the villages we stopped in were deserted. Not a living soul for miles around. We even came across a small town that was missing half of its buildings.

‘The last few days, we literally didn’t run into anyone. We really thought for a while that we were the last human beings left alive. Luckily, we ran into an army escorted transport truck and followed them all the way to New Paris.

‘There are still two more things to tell you. The first is that, as with the ghost towns, there were no more animals towards the end. No insects, no birds, nothing. Oh, we did come across a few beasts, but we all decided it was best to stay as far away from those horrors as possible. »

‘Let me guess. ‘Suggested Jake, falsely enthusiastic. ‘Animals that look normal, but have translucent skin, creepy air, abnormal strength and ferocity and no Oracle on their paw?’

Paul, Kanye and the twins stared at him in amazement.

‘Did you see them too?!’ Elisa exclaimed, glad she had not gone insane.

‘Yes, a mouse as big as a rat that devoured two stray cats right in front of me...’

‘Oh my gods...’ Sarah and Kanye were livid when they heard that. They had done so well to stay away from those creatures.

‘If a mouse can do that, it explains a lot. ‘Paul replied. ‘It wasn’t a mouse we saw, it was a Chihuahua. It may seem funny at first, but when it’s the only living thing in a ghost town, it feels completely different. It was devouring the corpse of a Saint Bernard mastiff...

‘Speaking of dogs... Did you maybe notice the empty doghouse in front of my parents’ house? »

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‘Well, my dog’s dead.’ Announced Paul with an unexpected coldness. ‘Apparently, a few days before we came home, the dog started barking like crazy in the middle of the night. My parents ignored it at first, but then it stopped and they went back to sleep. In the morning, they found half a paw in front of his kennel...

‘For the record, my dog was a well-trained German Shepherd Dog, the perfect guard dog. And the gate was closed. My parents thought it was a crime and reported it to the police, but to naught. Even they didn’t really believe it. »

Even if Jake was twice as dumb, he wouldn’t believe that one of those damn mutant bugs had nothing to do with it. The image of the dismembered cat being dragged in the dark was still vivid in his memory.

‘And the last thing you wanted to tell me?’ Jake asked, preferring to refocus the conversation on the main topic.

‘Ah, the latest scoop, this is a piece of information we managed to scrape together from the general who interrogated us.

‘You see, even though we realized that pieces of roads or cities were disappearing, we unconsciously thought that somehow the planet was growing.

‘Well, it’s the opposite. The Earth is shrinking. And very rapidly at that. Or rather, it’s slowly being transported away.