

The Oracle Paths

Volume 1: The Oracle

Chapter 9 - Eureka!

Even a long time after they came back home, both Jake and Crunch were still shaking. His lips were wobbling; his white tee-shirt was drenched with sweat. His face was bloodless, his hands cold in spite of the scorching temperature. He shivered non-stop, goosebumps all over his body, unable to keep his fear in check. He was petrified.

He had never felt such terror before. Until now, he thought that dealing with daily social phobia or chronic anxiety was already the worst kind of fear he would ever have to confront.

However, Jake had sensed something so dreadful watching this little mouse dragging a dead cat in the darkness that he almost pissed himself. There was something ghastly and deeply disturbing about seeing as a frozen bystander how a predator became prey in an absurd way.

He had no fleeing instincts, so he didn't move nor turn his back to the creature. Not that he could have. His heart had skipped a beat, his body being paralyzed as if he had been buried in fresh cement. A long time after the mouse was gone, he finally found the strength within him to snap out of his lethargy.

Now, that he was recovering his composure, he soon caught on about a few weird details. This mouse... Well, was it a mouse in the first place? After the False Third World War, it was not rare to see some badly mutated wild animals.

Even among humans, almost a third of the children, born from parents having been evacuated from the outskirts of the blasted cities, had some physical or brain defects one way or another. But these mutations were never a blessing.

Down's Syndrome, cleft lips or a few more fingers were not the worst gifts Mother Nature could give you. Being born without limbs, disfigured or without an asshole; THAT was the kind of mutated people you could find on a daily basis. It was even truer in poor districts and barren lands closest to the wastelands.

It was the first time he saw a mutated animal that was so many times scarier than his defenseless and weak rodent friends. With the sun contrast, he barely had a glimpse of the mouse features.

The creature seemed quite pale, almost translucent, his veins and arteries fully visible under its skin. Its claws were strangely thick and sharp for a tiny mammal like this one. The texture was like polished steel, clicking on the ground as it dragged the limbless cat, the tail in his jaw.

Yet, he didn't see much. The mouse was absurdly fast and strong, but not conceited enough to reveal itself under the sunlight. Its deepest instincts were still those of a mouse. Though, he did notice one abnormal thing.

In fact, it was something that would have been perfectly normal even the day before. The mouse didn't wear any Oracle bracelet.

'Xi, why didn't this mouse have an Oracle device?' It puzzles me. 'Have you not said before that every creature big enough had one? Why would cats be included and not rodents?'

[... Consulting database. All Earth's mammals are part of the Oracle project. Rodents are no exception.] Xi declared with an apathetic voice.

'... ' Jake frowned. It was not the answer he expected.

'Xi, you have access to my memories, right? Then check for me this mouse from a quarter ago.'

[...]

[Anomaly detected. A report has been sent to the Oracle Overseer. Awaiting a response.]

[Response received.]

[...]

Jake could tell something was wrong with this latency, but still waited patiently.

[No anomaly detected.] She finally said with an indifferent tone.

‘What the hell?!’ He cracked up. ‘Are you sure your Oracle Overseer doesn’t need a little maintenance? Some good old rewiring?’

[Your memories had been analyzed by one Oracle Overseer, whose Authority level is much higher than mine. He concluded that the hind legs were inside the darkness and too blurry to validate the authenticity of your proof.]

‘You’re hiding something, right?’

[Authority level insufficient.]

‘Can you lie?’ He asked a pretty stupid question. If she could, her answer too could be a lie. But he still tried. Her subtle silences proved that the Oracle A.I was trying to convey a hidden meaning to him, circumventing the Oracle’s rules.

[I can’t lie directly.] Xi hinted softly.

Jake immediately understood what she meant. Basically her silences were gold. They could dissimulate a hidden truth, or mislead him. For example, he noticed that the Oracle Overseer didn’t confirm the proof coming from his memories, but Xi never said he was wrong.

An anxiety attack was coming. He decided to psych himself up by emptying the shopping cart, putting away all his purchases at the right place. He put down the

cat litter in the restroom, then tidied the food in the fridge, adequate drawers and cupboards.

Jake also turned on the TV, switching to the news channel again, so that he could have a little bit of noise in the background. A long advertisement about a 5-million-dollar bonus jackpot with the national lottery was running, encouraging everyone to try their luck on this money game.

At first, he was still tidying his apartment, so he didn't think much about this. But, while he was pouring kibble in a bowl for Crunch, he froze, his face crumpling.

Panicked, he gave involuntarily a kick to the black cat that was actually rubbing his leg and purring like a V6 engine, drooling over his future meal.

He was an idiot. A fucking idiot!

What was so nice with these Oracle bracelets? The Prediction ability, of course! So what was one of the most popular wishes among human beings? Getting rich, obviously. Then what was the easiest way to get a lot of money without actually putting in the slightest effort? Earning the jackpot at the lottery or casino.

And yet, there was a hic. If everyone did the same wish, the Path would become impossibly hard to step into. He checked on his smartphone, he still had one hour to stake everything he had on this evening lottery.

He made two wishes first. The first one was that he desired to earn a lot of money in the fastest way. The second one was that he wanted to rake in the jackpot of today's lottery.

Unfortunately, he was right. He was too late. Many people probably had the same idea as him and betted everything in their possession on the winning draw of the lottery, as the Shadow Guide pointed the lottery numbers in order. This evening thousands of people at the very least would earn the winning prize. Divided between them it wouldn't amount to much.

None the less, the future of his bank account was not so bleak. He had still reacted quite fast, and was, lucky for him, a little bit more educated and smart than the average person. The Path from his first wish despite how unclear it was, assured him to earn more than by betting stupidly on the lottery.

Jake expressed a few more wishes, varying the duration and the amount of money each time. There was a way to earn nine times his stake by investing in the stock market. His savings were just a few thousand dollars, but he could borrow to his uncle and cousin.

He never dared to ask for money from his uncle Kalen, and even less so Anya.

He already had an inferiority complex for having wasted his family's expectations, so demanding some money would be the same as admitting they were right. When he left his uncle's home, it was to show them that he could succeed alone, but also and most of all to avoid their judgmental stares.

This time, the situation was different. He had a real plan. He just had to follow the Oracle Path, step by step and he would be fine. Coaching ability acknowledged that this plan was risk-proof. All lights were green!

He took out his smartphone, selected his uncle number and launched the call, that he didn't use for months. A few seconds later, the tired voice of his uncle resounded in his living room.

'Jake? It is quite a surprise to see you call me. What happened? You got dumped, right?'

'Fuck, why would I even need to call you if I was dumped?!' His bad temper flared instantly. His uncle was as bad mouthed as he remembered.

'Haha, all right, why did you call me then? Do you miss me?' Kalen joked, puffing on a cigar he got from somewhere only he knew.

It was not easy to get cigarettes in the 22nd century, not to mention cigars. To motivate people to quit smoking, the price of a cigarette pack had kept rising up

years after years until becoming a luxury good. It was still longed for by low-class citizens, but they couldn't afford it often.

'I need money.' He said the truth. He knew his uncle hated wasting time.

After a long and upsetting silence, the talk finally took the turn he desired.

'How much do you need, boy?' Kalen enquired seriously.

'How much can you lend me? I need them right now.'

'Hmmm, look at your bank account in ten minutes. See you soon, Jake. Take care!'

'Bye uncle and thanks, you won't regret it.' Jake promised.

'I know.'

He hung up. At last, the time had come to earn some easy money.
