

# The Oracle Paths

## Volume 2: The First Ordeal

### Chapter 43 - Tasting session

This new Encoded Aether was reassuring, as it gave a future to Earth weapons. It may not have been noticeable since they were still weak, but when the average opponent became stronger and faster than the steel of a bullet, the time for weapons would be over.

He had no doubt that more advanced weapons existed, but were they so easily accessible? Moreover, from what he understood, unless he lost his Aether-reinforced weapons, the Aether could be retrieved and transferred.

Therefore, he also had to beware of people's greed. The moment unscrupulous thugs realized that his weapon contained Aether, Jake would become a target.

As he finished scanning the data about the new type of Aether, William and Amy joined him at the bottom of the hill. They were out of breath, having obviously run to keep him in sight and clearly lacking training.

‘Any questions?’ He asked calmly.

‘What are we going to do now?’ Will replied, massaging his feet.

He had taken the opportunity to take off his shoes while Jake let them catch their breath and blisters were indeed developing. Soon the blisters would follow.

‘We’re heading to a Red Cube to participate in the first Ordeal, while facing whatever is within our reach to acquire Aether and strengthen ourselves. Finding food and water would not be a bad idea either.’

‘Sounds good to me.’ Will nodded.

‘On the other hand, if the three of us are going to go for a walk together in the next few days, I suppose it would be good form for all three of us to know each other’s first names, what do you say? William Hopkins, if memory is already failing you, at your service.’

Jake was slightly unsettled by Will’s bluntness. When was the last time he’d given his name to anyone... Since the party at Paul’s, perhaps? He wasn’t sure anymore. But maybe he was an anomaly and a lot of people like Will had continued to interact with people until the last day.

‘All right. My name is Jake Wilderth.’

‘Wild-Earth? Funny last name...’ Will carelessly commented.

‘It’s a very old family name...’

Jake didn’t care much about his family except for his uncle and cousin, but knowing them, some of them should have survived. The Wilderths were all gifted. If he wasn’t a notorious procrastinator and socially awkward, his life would have been very different.

‘I see...’ Will replied, seeing nothing at all.

‘My name is Amanda Allen, but everyone calls me Amy.’ The young woman, who hadn’t said a word all along, introduced herself.

‘Nice to meet you, Amy.’ Will replied, politely.

‘Nice to meet you.’ Jake added. ‘Well, now that the introductions are made, I suggest we hit the road for good. I have no intention of spending the night here.’

Hufzare oval, Waii laevut imre frt vfzt, ovur npo val iufovuz lvmul gfhc mr, npiiare f ezaqfhu mr val dfhu gudmzu euooare gfhc mr val duuo, zuftw om em.

As for Amy, she wore comfy boots, and the embarrassing operation on her jeans had paid off. She was no longer restricted in her movements. On the contrary, she couldn't wait to get going, as the cold on the hill had chilled her to the bone.

Moving into the unknown, Will and Amy followed in Jake's footsteps, a ball of excitement and fear in their tummies, convinced that what lay ahead of them looked bleak, but that at least they would have the chance to survive a little longer, and maybe even live.

The group walked at a brisk pace for almost an hour before reaching the edge of the forest. The foliage of the deciduous trees was now partially masking the sky and the atmosphere had quickly become more anxious.

All that could be heard were the group's restrained breaths, and except for Jake, who was displaying a quiet vigilance, the other two were turning around frequently, jumping at the slightest suspicious noise.

From time to time Jake would stop abruptly and then start up again as if nothing had happened, which made them miss a heartbeat.

Sometimes he would kneel down next to a grass, a flower or a fruit that seemed unusual to him, observe it from every angle, taste it, and depending on his diagnosis, ignore it again or, on the contrary, pick it up and put it away in his huge hiking bag.

It must be said that the bracelet had enormously simplified his assessment of the edibility or otherwise of the surrounding flora. All he had to do now was taste the plants in infinitesimal quantities, and then consult the status of his health immediately afterwards.

The device indicated the presence of poison in the body, where potential harmful effects at higher doses. Since many drugs are also poisons at a certain dose, as are some vital nutrients such as sugar and salt, the Status obviously did not indicate a 'Poisoned' status at such a low dose.

It was Jake, who interpreted the variations in his vital signs to make a judgment.

Of course, it didn't tell him everything, but it did save him valuable time, since all he had to do was get a fraction of the sample into his bloodstream to determine its impact.

Once he had become familiar with this hidden function of the Statute, he was increasingly able to interpret these values. The fact that with his new statistics, his IQ was close to 180 ( $16.1 * 1.1 = 17.71$ ) was no doubt a factor.

Why did he need to identify the plants, when he had been preparing for the worst for 3 months, so much so that he knew as much as the average herbalist? Simply because nothing was ever simple.

In the same way that humans and animals had had their Aetheric code modified when they arrived on B842, plants had benefited from the same treatment. And even if this was not the case, the Aether generated by the atmosphere would affect them sooner or later.

Moreover, there were certainly plants that did not exist on earth around him. Just as the Digesters were born out of the atmosphere of the Mirror Universe, perhaps more plant-like beings were born in the same way. More simply, they were perhaps portions of forest belonging to a universe other than his own.

Apart from the common plants and trees of his world, which he recognized, he was content to collect only those he did not know and which had been permeated by the Aether. By consuming them, his own Aether did not evolve, but he enriched his database in the Logbook.

He had decided to ignore Earth's plants because he was aware that at the scale of B842 they were too rare, and not necessarily interesting compared to what Aether's impregnated flora had to offer. It was better to just identify the plants that he had a chance of encountering anywhere on this planet.

He had identified several edible plants, one whose tuber was similar to a sweet potato, except that the flesh was pink and the taste slightly spicy, but at least they wouldn't starve anytime soon.

According to the bracelet, this pink potato had a powerful antioxidant power, an ideal nutritional profile and significantly accelerated recovery, as did virtually everything he had tested so far. Aether seemed to be a real panacea.

In fact, he had also solved the mystery of why his ribs healed so quickly. The silvery blood he had consumed was literally like an elixir of youth.

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He had mentally remembered that the next time he met one of his monsters, he would leave nothing to the vultures, not even the bones.

The most surprising thing was that the Digestor didn't have such great vitality, otherwise it would have been impossible to kill. For this blood to be so powerful there had to be other properties at work.

[It's because Digestors are born from the Aether.] Xi intervened.

Their blood continues to attract the surrounding Aether after their death. Which means that when you consume it, the flow of Aether through your body is greater. But it's temporary.]

Will and Amy watched his antics without saying a word, half-understanding his intentions. They too had checked their wristband, but they didn't understand the Aether's workings as well since their rank was still 0.

Despite Asrael's explanations, the Encode, Compress and Aether Storage functions were inaccessible to them. Even if they had been able to use the Red Crystal immediately to increase their Aether Strength by one point and check their Aether Status, their options were limited. It was still a nice gift, though.

Basically, it was too late to quietly do the small, opportunistic missions of the Coaching feature. In order to get to Rank 1, they had to kill a Digestor.

Amy couldn't take it anymore, and ended up asking the question, ahead of Will, who was not far from cracking either.

'The bracelet gives you the effect of what you're tasting.' Jake simply replied, before identifying a new white grass, covered with red cloudy patches.

Bft iphc, ovu ezfl jfl utagiu, gpo arduhout, iufsare f hfzzamr oflou ar val qmpov.

At first they kept a lost expression, then after a while the illumination took place and they started to collect and taste plants in their turn. Unfortunately, because of Amy's purse and Will's work case, they had nothing to store their finding and they were soon overloaded.