

The Oracle Paths

Volume 2: The First Ordeal

Chapter 50 – The Loss of Innocence

By the time Amy and Will returned, he had finished sorting the food and they had found a bag and clothes matching their size.

Will had found a hiking backpack similar to Jake's, but of much lower quality, while he had swapped his suit for a pair of trellis pants, a black T-shirt, a large sweater and a pair of waterproof farm boots. Bad luck for him, the shoes were in the missing part of the house.

The mix wasn't quite right, and the clothes were a little too big for him, but at least he was comfortable and ready for adventure.

As for Amy, she had also found a hiking backpack and a tent, indicating that the resident couple were avid campers and hikers.

She had exchanged her jeans, deliberately torn by Jake, for a pair of jogging pants and was now wearing a fleece over her brown top. The outfit was a hair too big, but it did the job. They had also filled their new bags with a change of clothes.

'This is much better.' Jake congratulated them, giving them a rare smile.

'Fill your bags with everything I've sorted on the table as much as you can carry, and we'll be on our way. Also check the bathrooms, if you haven't already, for pharmaceuticals and body hygiene.'

'Already done.' Amy proudly replied, 'We've already taken everything that could be useful. As for the pharmacy, all they had was an empty box of paracetamol.'

When people say that people in the country are healthier than those in the city, I guess it's not a stretch.'

'Too bad. But I suppose it would have been too good if they had a first-aid kit or empty vials... '

Jake was complaining, but he still found small 50cl bottles of water that he chose to use as a makeshift container for his next Digestors bloodletting.

Will and Amy's bags were fully loaded a few minutes later, and after a well-deserved snack, they felt it was time to leave.

However, as they left the house and walked past the pens again, Jake met the starving gaze of a cow, and at that moment, a horrible but impossible to ignore idea popped into his mind. He suddenly stopped walking, lost in thought.

'What's going on? What's going on?' Will asked, inquisitive by nature.

Jake didn't answer right away, but after a moment's reflection his decision was made.

'Have you thought about what's going to happen to these animals when we leave?' He questioned them, with the harshest expression they'd seen on his face since they'd been with him.

'Uh, I imagine they'll eventually starve to death or be eaten by a pack of monsters...'
'Will suggested, hesitantly.

Amy remained silent, but you could tell that the idea had taken hold and she could see where he was going with it. Jake didn't miss anything of her mutism.

'Exactly.' He concurred gravely. 'And why do the Digestors want us dead? After all, you yourself said your group was nearly exterminated by those creatures. If they hunted us down out of hunger, one would have been enough... '

Will's expression suddenly changed. It could have been because Jake's words reminded him of a very bad memory, but more likely, he had just figured out what he was about to make them do.

They want our Aether... 'Murmured Amy, in a barely audible voice.

'Unless they're hunting for sport, which I doubt, and we don't want to give it to them.' Jake continued. 'And for that, I see a simple solution that could make us much stronger.'

'You're asking us to kill every animal on this farm, tell me if I'm wrong.' Revealed Will, an alienating grimace on his face.

'Yes, I am.'

'Yes, I was just joking with you?' Will retorted with a slight hope.

'No, it's not a joke.' Jake declared, with the coldness of a death sentence... 'All animals must be slaughtered without exception.'

'But why?' Will begged, his apparent calm completely gone.

'You know why.' Amy replied, strangely peaceful for once. 'I don't want to die, I don't want to live that fear again. To not live through a night like that again, I'm willing to slaughter all the livestock on this farm if I have to... As for you, without Jake you'd be dead.'

Amy's last words had the desired effect. Will's expression shifted from unease to enlightenment, and then acceptance. A minute later, he had regained his usual poise.

'I guess the only way to survive is to get your hands dirty...' Will capitulated, this time with a certain sadness in his eyes, but no less resolute.

'In any case it's an experiment that needs to be done.' Jake made the call. 'Since the Aether is an inherent part of our bodies and matter in general, the Aether we see above a Digestor corpse is just the additional Encoded Aether.'

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘The density of Aether in our bodies works as an amplifier or a coefficient if you prefer. 10 points equals a coefficient of 1. 20 points, and our effective physical stats double. What do you think happens if our bodies run out of Aether?’

For a moment, Amy and Will’s eyes glazed over, lost in the void, a sign that they were mentally communicating with their Oracle AIs.

‘Oh, I see. Both matter and energy disappear without Aether, since it is the Aether that catalyzes their effects. So our bodies would disappear too.’ Will and Amy both concluded in unison.

‘Exactly. No Aether means a zero coefficient. The forces binding our molecules together would become zero, the nucleus of our atoms would dissolve in an instant, returning to mere energy.

‘That’s why, if these Digestors don’t disappear after we absorb their Aether, it means that part of it cannot be stolen. What I assume is the so-called Aetheric Signature that identifies the world we came from. To the Earthlings, that would be our ten points.

‘Then what’s the point of killing those animals?’ Will interrupted him, puzzled. ‘By your own deduction, it would be pointless, since they don’t have any extra Aether.’

Jake gave him a big, predatory smirk.

‘Not necessarily... Aslael told us. Aether’s density is higher on B842. We’ll live longer because of that, even if we don’t do anything. This does not appear in our Aether Status, since this Aether is not related to our Aether Code, but we definitely feel its effects.

‘Will, don’t you think a little Digestor’s blood could cure a lung puncture like yours overnight?’

‘That’s right... I don’t feel so bad, after all the walking this morning and the injury last night.’ Will admitted in good faith.

‘So let’s get to work... We’ll start with the chickens and rabbits, then finish with the cattle.’ Planned Jake in the most inexpressive tone he felt he could muster.

[I’m proud of you.] Xi complimented him, like a mother bird watching her chick leave the nest. [You’ve learned your lesson well.]

‘Haha, I had a good teacher.’ Jake replied in his mind.

Will and Amy didn’t say anything, which signified their assent. Then the trio went to the chicken coop, presenting the dreadful look of soldiers having to execute innocent prisoners of war.

When they arrived in front of the small building, Jake motioned for them to wait outside awhile. He pulled the side bar lock and the door opened.

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Perhaps because Jake wasn’t a hypocrite like those who ate meat but couldn’t tolerate animal suffering, or perhaps because of the Digestor’s Aether affecting his personality, he showed no hesitation.

Jake mercilessly grabbed a chicken by the neck and, choking the pity in his heart, twisted it with a sharp jerk. A tiny Aether filament emitting a low-pitched sound was then expelled from the body of the bird. It was nothing compared to the Digestors, but not insignificant either.

Deeply repressing his guilt, he stored the Aether filament in his bracelet. He threw the hen’s corpse into a corner of the chicken coop without giving it a look and came out under the stunned gaze of Amy and Will, and a Crunch salivating at the sight of all those plump chickens.

He didn't close the pen. These animals had an Oracle device just like them. The coach must've been giving them nonstop alerts since they arrived. If they didn't run away after that, then there was no need for scruples, since a Digestor or another predator would do it for them.

A few chickens escaped, but the majority remained confined to the chicken coop. Their fate had been sealed at that very moment.

'What happened?' Will inquired, in a nervous tone.

'It works. Some Aether in there.' Jake confirmed. 'Now it's your turn.'

Will being next on the list, he went into the chicken coop. It took twenty minutes for him to come out of the building, but when he came out he showed his usual phlegm, although there was no doubt that this experience had left an indelible mark on his soul.

Amy then entered, her hands and shoulders trembling even before she entered the small building. This time it took them almost an hour and a half. When they began to believe that she would never make it, she came out of the chicken coop with tears streaming from her eyes.

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