

# The Oracle Paths

## Volume 2: The First Ordeal

### Chapter 57 – Reunion

The balls of incandescent light, which did not respect any of the rules of gravity and which acted as suns, blinded the trio. The rays of light were reflected and diffracted by the natural prisms that formed certain grains of translucent sand, making any attempt at orientation difficult.

Multiple rainbows were imprinted on their retinas, causing a strange sensation of drunkenness and psychic torture at the same time. This was reminiscent of the sensory deprivation protocols used in experiments of dubious ethics, which had proved that only a few days were enough to turn a healthy man into a vegetable.

Fortunately, Jake was at the helm of the ship, wearing his new sunglasses, which he had miraculously taken out of his pack, which had become a veritable wonder box in the eyes of Amy and Will. They were content to follow his reassuring shadow, praying that they would soon be able to leave this desolate place.

Amy also had a pair of sunglasses with her when she arrived on planet B842, which she had unfortunately quickly lost in her frantic flight to survive within minutes of being transported here.

The good news was that it was neither too hot nor too cold. One might have expected a scorching heat in a desert with no water holes or clouds, but it was not.

The sun's càress was bàrèly warm and a gentle breeze from the direction of the Red Cube to which they were heading made the walk very bearable. In fact, anything was more comfortable than running out of breath, dirty and sweaty in order to escape from Digestors eager to devour them.

Which brought us to a second piece of good news. No Digestors. Or anything alive yet to be seen by them, in fact. A real breath of fresh hope, given their circumstances.

Neither of these monsters had followed them into the desert and the two colossal creatures were already a bad memory.

Even so, Jake remained confident. Many animals would choose the comfort and abundance of the forest, rather than venturing into a barren and unknown desert for a prey or two that was a little too persistent.

According to his Oracle, it was past noon. He intended to advance at least until nightfall. Firstly, because he hoped to get out of this desert as quickly as possible, their food and water resources being limited. And secondly, because he didn't know how night temperatures behaved in this desert.

Even in the deserts on Earth, temperatures at night could approach zero degrees despite the stifling heat that was bàrèly bearable in the daytime. Considering the pleasant càress of the sun at what was supposed to be the hottest hour of the day, it was better not to be there yet to discover it.

After a short break, during which the group took the opportunity to quench their thirst and have a snack, the trio set off again. Amy and Will had been extremely cooperative since he had given them his opinion on the situation. Not that it made much difference in the end, since with or without them, his decision would have been the same.

As they progressed, the group began to get restless, trotting around in the late afternoon to gain time. The sea of cyan sand was still stretching endlessly towards the horizon and even Jake was showing signs of nervousness.

Hu vft fizuftw tuhatut om lnurt ovu raevo ar ovu tuluzo. Hu jfl cuunare val dareuzl hzmlut ovfo val ovumzw jfl jzmre, mz ovuw juzu iacuiw om lnurt f suzw gft raevo. Id ovuw juzu rmj lozmreuz frt qmzu zulaiauro ovfr gudmzu, ovuzu jfl f iaqao om vmj qphv ovuaz gmtaul hmpit jaovlofrt.

The heat still made them sweat and the cold still made them shiver. The gain in strength and constitution had indeed changed things, but it was not enough. With a source of wood, they could have considered making a fire, but no vegetable Eminence deigned to show them his presence.

Eventually night fell and the gloomy Jake decided to set up camp. They quickly set up the tent they had 'borrowed' not without difficulty. If Jake hadn't learned how to set up a tent in the last few months, they would have wasted a considerable amount of time.

His instincts had not deceived him and as soon as the twilight suns disappeared, a silver moon replaced them, accompanied by a sharp drop in temperature. Very similar to the Earth's, this moon, by the way. Perhaps it had also been absorbed here along with them.

The question that now arose was, 'Where had the purple moons gone?'. The changing climates and landscapes from one area to another, as well as the changing sky, made orientation using the sun or stars impossible. The Oracle device was absolutely indispensable.

The breeze that gently cooled them a few minutes before turned into an icy bite freezing their bones. With no combustibles, they could only huddle together, wrapped in the sleeping bags and coats they had in their packs.

From time to time, they would chew strips of dried Digestor meat. Although this did not cure them of the cold, it circulated a pleasant, invigorating warmth radiating from their stomachs that kept them going.

Eventually, however, the night passed and they survived. Jake, seized by boredom, even came to analyze the translucent sand under their feet, only to stupidly realize that it was actually salt. A coloured salt, but salt anyway.

Despite the icy breeze, the grains remained warm and comforting. In the absence of other life forms, this salt logically absorbed all the surrounding Aether in the atmosphere.

On this hazardous idea, he decided to take a few samples.

Nfopzfiiw, vu oflout ovu lfio. lo oflout iacu lfio, rm tmpgo fgmpo ao. Bpo ovuzu jfl lmquovare qmzu. Al hmqqmr lfio jfl ulluroafiiw lmtapq hvimzatu, ao jfl ruhullfzw om nzmsatu nmofllapq ar uypasfiuro ypfroaoaul ovzmpev f tasuzladaut tauo, zahv urmpev ar sueuofgiul, fl ovulu ojm qaruzfil jmzcut ar ofrtuq.

The high blood pressure problems of our modern societies were precisely the consequence of such an imbalance, as sodium promotes extracellular water retention and a number of other vital functions.

No problem with this salt. A strange miracle of nature. A perfect ratio of potassium and sodium, combined with a host of other

equally important minerals like magnesium and calcium in the right proportions, all perfectly bioavailable.

Many dietary supplements in particular boasted of satisfying our vital needs in minerals or vitamins, but sometimes suffered from poor bioavailability or on the contrary were overdosed, making them practically ineffective, even dangerous.

No impact on Aether stats as with pink potato or Digestor meat on the other hand. They couldn't always have it all.

It was possible, however, that with more time, this salt would end up turning into something else by absorbing energy from the surrounding atmosphere, eventually obtaining properties that it did not yet have.

When the suns rose, the temperatures rose again and the warmth of the day magically returned in a few minutes. They lazily dismantled their tent, swallowed their umpteenth slice of meat and cup of Digestor's blood before setting off again without conviction, the night cold had taken its toll on their exhausted bodies.

None of the members of the trio had managed to sleep soundly. The slightest movement caused a horrible draught to circulate between them which immediately awakened the other two members of the group. After a while, no one dared to move and so their chances of recovery from their forced march disappeared.

There was, however, another group of survivors not far from them in much worse condition. Really not far from them. No sooner were they ready to leave than they heard screams. Their senses, heightened by the heavy silence of the desert, immediately captured these new sounds, causing the trio to suddenly turn around.

Nearly a kilometer away, the silhouette of six disheveled humanoid shadows staggered painfully in their direction. The shouts came from female voices and a male voice that Jake identified as the Playboy's.

Tvuaz smahul juzu zflnw, fiqml0 fnvmrah. Suuare oval, ovu ozam npo ovuaz ovarel tmjr frt jfaout nfoaurow. lo ommc f emmt ovazow qarpoul dmz ovu ezmpn md lpzsasmzl om bmar ovuq, prtuz ovu dzplozfout efxu md Jfcu, tallfoaldaut jaov jfloare val nzuhampl oaqu.

Yet, when they were discovered to be disoriented and exhausted, even a loner like Jake felt a sense of pity. You only had to know how to count to notice that there were fewer of them than when they separated at the top of the snowy hill. They must have had some unfortunate encounters.

'What a shrewd deduction, Sherlock!' Xi commented sarcastically.

' Thanks. I amaze myself sometimes.'

When they finally arrived in front of their camp, they stopped not knowing what to say or do. Even the child remained frozen in place, like a soldier standing at attention. After a while, the Playboy broke the ice after clearing his throat.

'Hmm, can we travel with you?'