

The Oracle Paths

Volume 3: The Oracle Cities

Chapter 297 - Zhorion City

He was about to begin his infiltration when Xi's voice resounded in his mind again. At her tone, he knew right away that something serious had just happened.

[Lu Yan is dead.]

'What?!' Jake exclaimed aloud, practically ruining all his efforts at discretion with a single word.

That was great news! Erm, not really... Taking the information more seriously, he quickly became gloomy again. How long had it been since he had abandoned Lu Yan? Not much more than a day. Even if she was awake, she should still be recovering in the crypt he had made for her.

How could she have died so quickly? Had she tried to come out of her hiding place and a Player or an enemy creature had found her? Or was her hiding place not so good and a Player or a passing monster discovered her while she was still unconscious? Last possibility, she had died from her wounds before regaining consciousness. It was unlikely but possible. After all, he hadn't even bothered to make her drink any water.

None of these assumptions were frightening for him. What Jake dreaded was that a Zhorion might have tracked them all the way back to this place after their carnage the day before. He could not guarantee with certainty that the blood of these monsters did not contain some kind of beacon. Unless these aliens could detect Flintium?

The pores of their skin must have absorbed a fair amount of it during the battle. The traces of Red Soul Stone present in his body had long since been neutralized by his own Green Soul Stone, but Lu Yan did not have that privilege. As soon as Jake left her, it was possible that the Flintium in her body that he had been unable to flush out had begun to radiate again.

Instinctively, this reasoning made sense to him, but if a Zhorion had really murdered her, with its intelligence it must have immediately realized that it was impossible for the young woman to get out of the underground galleries by herself in her condition. It was easy to deduce that she had a teammate and it was likely to draw attention to him.

[I recommend hurrying in this case. Zhorions are scarier than you think. If they killed her, they can find you, too.] Xi warned him with some anxiety.

‘What makes you say that? Did another memory come back?’ Jake interjected with some doubt.

[I think so. It’s still unclear, but I’m sure that locating you is a piece of cake. The fact that they haven’t yet specifically attacked you is probably not coincidental, but by your action you’ve caught their attention].

‘In this case... let’s not waste time.’ Jake muttered resolutely.

He was now in a gigantic underground basement about ten kilometers in diameter. A painted dome-shaped roof several hundred meters high formed the equivalent of their celestial vault. Fluorescent crystals embedded in the rock gave the impression of looking at a starry sky. These stars were crimson in colour.

They were Flintium crystals or rather unmined Red Soul Stones. It was the first time he saw Soul Stones of harvestable size except for the one forming the pommel of his machete. The rest of the time they were massive and impossible to extract or displace.

If he didn't have the revitalizing and neutralizing soul energy of his Green Soul Stone continuously feeding his soul, he might have already lost his mind.

As for the city in front of him, the architecture was reminiscent of the Aztecs or the Mayans, but the colorimetry was dark and sinister, oscillating between shades of dark red and gray-black. The streets were paved, with lanterns fueled by other luminescent crystals enveloping the city in a subdued glow.

Still, the technology seemed rather archaic, not to say primitive. It was hard to believe that these Zhorions had been able to build these Sanctuary Bubbles and then live in these conditions. Nevertheless, all the structures were made of stone and their mastery of metallurgy seemed rather advanced, as evidenced by the few pipes snaking along the houses like big earthworms. A paradox.

He thought that his arrival at the foot of the stairs would have attracted the attention of the inhabitants or at least of a sentry in charge of security, but he was truly alone. Even his previous shout of surprise hadn't triggered any reaction. Shrugging his shoulders, he decided that this was a good thing for him and immediately proceeded to explore.

Jake progressed slowly at first out of caution. He walked along the walls of the closest buildings, pausing at each blind spot or transition between shadows to inspect the surroundings. None of these buildings had windows, and this prevented him from being able to say for certain whether the houses were empty. Under the circumstances, he did not have the luxury of checking.

After a few moments, when he realized that he was really alone, he relaxed and his speed increased significantly.

The side Quest he had accepted had begun to update itself in real time as he made more discoveries, but the mystery was not yet considered solved. He

was, however, eligible for a reward. If he left now, though, his reward would likely be mediocre.

When Jake had moved about two kilometers into the city, he noticed a change in the scenery. The paved streets were wider and generally cleaner. The materials also seemed to be of better quality. A kind of reddish gold covered some of the frontages and facades, and the buildings no longer lacked windows. It was like the transition from a poor neighborhood to a richer one.

This section of the city also seemed deserted, but open-air stalls still covered with general merchandise indicated that until recently, this place must have been bustling with activity like any shopping mall on a weekend.

‘What the hell is going on here?’ Jake whispered inwardly with a bad feeling.

Al vu fnnzmfvut mru md ovu lofiil, vu eifrhut fo ovu quzhvfrtalur mr talnifw frt val dfhu arlofroiw talomzout ar vmzzmz. Fzulviw tuhfnafout vuftl juzu dimfoare ar f hflo azmr hmrofaruz ar f zut iaypat ovfo jfl loaii jfzq tpu om ovu vaev ouqnuzfopzul ar ovu huiifz.

All these heads belonged to monsters from the island or strange aliens, but one of these faces clearly belonged to a human and the most horrible thing about it was that this face was familiar to him. It was his cousin Noemie’s.

A few months earlier, Jake would probably have puked his guts out at such a scene, but instead it was an intense fury that overwhelmed him. The light emitted by the red crystals of the lanterns around him suddenly intensified, as if these crystals were responding to his sudden emotional outburst.

His fangs lengthened, his veins glowed like lava and his irises sparkled like galaxies under the influence of these lights, but a brief contact between his palm and the pommel of his machete was enough to reverse the process and restore his lucidity.

Looking back on what almost happened, Jake got goose bumps. A few seconds more and he would have lost his mind. If he wasn't sure that the crystals were made of Flintium, he now knew for sure. He had also just discovered that the Red Soul Stones could amplify emotions. His short-lived anger had briefly surpassed the neutralizing abilities of his green stone.

Quickly circling the marketplace, Jake quickly confirmed that all the foodstuffs sold were primarily blood-based. The blood-filled container with heads floating inside reminded him of some sangria or punch recipes, except that the alcohol had been replaced by blood and the fruit slices by heads.

The other stands offered other 'home-made recipes', but each of them was more disgusting than the next. As he began to feel extremely uncomfortable, his feeling of foreboding became clearer as well. Without wasting any more time, he set off again.

Jake had thought there was still time because Sarah and the others were still alive, but now he knew that their elimination from the Ordeal was hanging by a thread. Judging by the terror grimace on his cousin's face, she would probably remember that death for the rest of her life.

The clearer space in the marketplace had allowed him to notice a building in the distance that was larger than the others and his gut was telling him that this was the direction in which he should go. His Shadow Guide also indicated that Sarah was there.

The building in question looked like some kind of ancient Mayan pyramid and was at the other end of the cave. It took him more than half an hour to approach it safely, but the unexpected cries of an ecstatic crowd confirmed that he had finally reached his destination.

Hattur guvart f curru-iacu gpaitare, Jfcu hfpevo f eiaQnlu arlatu, ovzmpbev ovu zfzu faz surol, md raevoQfzalv dmpz-iueeut hzufopzul jvmlu eimjare uwul zudiuhout ovu Qftrull jaovar. Hmitare val gzufov, vu ovur hzfjiut pn

ovu curruí jfii om iau difo mr ovu zmmd guvart f lofopu md jvfo vu ovmpervo jfl f Zvmzamr hvait.

Satisfied with his hiding place and a high, clear field of vision, he was finally able to look at what was capturing the crowd's attention to the point of making them frenzied. These aliens did indeed look like red-eyed dark elves as they had been described to him. In other words, Zhorions. He had finally met them in the flesh.

Choosing to ignore them, he followed their gaze and when he realized what they were looking at, his heart temporarily stopped beating in his *Ch est*.